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**Author**

Byrne, Jason, Wolch, Jennifer

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**Nature, race and parks: Past research and future directions for geographic research**

Jason Byrne  
School of Environment, Griffith University, Gold Coast, Qld., 4222, Australia

and

Jennifer Wolch  
College of Environmental Design, University of California, Berkeley,  
230 Wurster Hall 1820, Berkeley, CA 94720–1820, USA

**Contact:** Dr. Jason Byrne, Lecturer – Griffith School of Environment, G31, 3.06  
Griffith University, Gold Coast campus, Queensland, Australia, 4222.  
Ph. (07) 5552-7723, Fax. (07) 5552-8244, Email: [Jason.Byrne@griffith.edu.au](mailto:Jason.Byrne@griffith.edu.au)

## **Abstract**

Geographic research on parks has been wide-ranging but has seldom examined how and why people use parks, leaving these questions to leisure science, which privileges socio-demographic variables over urban socio-spatial explanations (e.g. historical, political-economic and location factors). This article examines recent geographic perspectives on park use, drawing upon environmental justice, cultural landscape, and political ecology paradigms to redirect our attention from park users to a more critical appreciation of the historical, socio-ecological and political-economic processes that operate through, and in turn shape park spaces and park-going behaviors. We challenge partial, user-oriented approaches and suggest new directions for geographic research on parks.

## **Keywords:**

Urban parks, nature, race, cultural landscape, environmental justice, political ecology.

## I. Introduction

‘...as we produce nature, so do we produce social relations’ (Katz and Kirby, 1991: 268)

It is peculiar that geographers, as scholars of the nature-society interface, have not studied parks as extensively as researchers in other disciplines. Parks are rarely innocuous elements of the landscape, especially in cities. Paradoxically described as crime havens, treasured family refuges, and oases for urban residents and wildlife alike, parks vary in size, age, design, ornamental embellishments, planting, facilities, maintenance, and patterns of use. Their constitutive elements—trees, grass, pathways, benches, ponds, fountains, statues, gardens, playgrounds, sporting facilities etc.—reflect diverse ideologies of nature-making. Historically, parks have been idealized as salubrious spaces (Frederick Law Olmsted’s ‘lungs of city’), as well as places of social interaction and tutelage, inscription of cultural identity and memory, tourist destinations and anchors for property development. And all levels of government have been involved in park design and management.

Beyond geography, most scholars have investigated five aspects of parks: (i) the *history and ideology* of parks (e.g. Cavett et al., 1982; Cranz, 1982; Cranz and Boland, 2003, 2004; Gordon, 2002; Lehr, 2001; Maver, 1998; McInroy, 2000; McIntire, 1981; Menéndez, 1998; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992); (ii) park *access and utilization* (e.g. Aminzadeh and Afshar, 2004; May and Rogerson, 1995; McCleave et al., 2006; Oguz, 2000; Oltremari and Jackson, 2006; Pavlikakis and Tsihrintzis, 2006; Perez-Verdin et al., 2004; Schwartz, 2006; Sardon and Faust, 2006); (iii) the potential of parks to foster *sustainable urban livelihoods* (e.g. Chiesura, 2004; Domene et al., 2005; Huang et al., 2002; Pezzoli, 2000; 2002; Pincetl and Gearin, 2005); (iv) the *ecosystem services benefits* of parks (e.g., Hough, 1994; Daily, 1997; Bolund and Hunhammar, 1999; Savard et al., 2000; Gobster, 2001; Farber et al., 2002;

Hougnier et al., 2005); and (v) how parks benefit the *health and wellbeing* of urban residents (e.g. Bedimo-Rung, 2005; Frumpkin, 2006; Cohen et al., 2007). Especially within leisure research, a frequently investigated topic is how people use parks.

Diverse people use parks in different ways. Leisure researchers typically attribute this to differences in socio-demographic factors such as class, age, gender and especially race / ethnicity (see Floyd and Shinew, 1999; Gobster, 2002; Hutchison, 1987; Lee, 1972; Payne et al., 2002; Shinew et al., 2004a; Tinsley et al., 2002; West, 1989). Ethno-racial differences in park use have been found in all types of parks (Carr and Williams, 1993; Ewert et al., 1993; 2001; Gobster, 2002; Johnson et al., 1998; Tierney et al., 2001; Washburn, 1978). Yet leisure researchers rarely consider how ethno-racial formations might configure park spaces themselves—and how in turn ethno-racially inscribed park spaces may influence park use or non-use. This is a remarkable oversight.

Although it lacks theoretical coherence, geographic research on parks and leisure has been wide-ranging (Coppock, 1982). Geographers have studied multiple aspects of parks, including their history, spatial distribution and accessibility, use patterns and user perceptions, and benefits (e.g. Foresta, 1984; Henderson and Wall, 1979; Hingston, 1931; Jim, 1989; Lawrence, 1993; Madge, 1997; Marne, 2001; Stillwell, 1963; Ulrich, 1979; Ulrich and Addoms, 1981; Westover, 1985; Wolfe, 1964; Young, 1996). Recently, drawing on cultural landscape, environmental justice and political ecology paradigms, geographers have begun to weave an integrated research agenda, examining for instance, ‘how and why specific nature-culture assemblages like parks are produced’ (Braun, 2005; Castree, 2003; Whatmore, 2002), who has access to these diverse culture-natures (Heynen, 2003; 2006; Heynen and Perkins, 2005; Neumann, 1996; Olwig, 1996; 2005; Swyngedouw and Hynen, 2003) and how ethno-racially differentiated park access configures the life chances and

livelihoods of urban residents (e.g Brownlow, 2005, 2006; Byrne et al., 2007 and Wolch et al., 2005).

In this article we explore geographic studies of the spatiality of parks, and park use. Our discussion is divided into four sections. Taking a cue from Katz and Kirby (1991), Pulido et al. (1996) and Brownlow (2005; 2006), in section 1 we examine ideologies of class, race and nature that have historically infused park-making projects. As Loukaitou-Sideris (1995: 89) noted, ‘past ideas and values about...parks continue to dominate and determine their present design and programming’. We do not provide a comprehensive history of parks here (see Chadwick, 1966; Conway, 1991; Cranz, 1978, 1982 and Lasdun, 1992). Instead we draw upon Foucault’s (1977; 1980) genealogical approach to chart the contradictory ideological terrain of ‘the park idea’ as a socio-natural project (Jones and Wills, 2005), and how park-making ventures have molded socio-ecological and ethno-racial relations of power within cities.

In section two, we examine explanations for ethno-racially differentiated park utilization, showing that they are apolitical and ahistorical, underpinned by striking Anglo-normativity (Floyd, 1998), grossly generalize ethno-racial differences in park use, and overlook diverse understandings of space and place that have historically configured parks. Parks are not ideologically neutral spaces, nor are they physically homogeneous; rather, they exist for specific ecological, social, political and economic reasons—reasons that shape how people perceive and use parks.

In the third section, we examine how geographers and others have begun to explore the socio-ecological relations of power invested within nature spaces like parks, offering us fresh insights into ethno-racially differentiated park use (e.g. Werry, 2008). Insights from cultural landscape, environmental justice and political ecology studies challenge simplistic notions about how people of color access and use urban greenspace. Results show that differential

relations of power and regional racial formations can determine park location, facilities, maintenance, and opportunities for access (e.g. Brownlow, 2006). Prompted by this emerging literature, we propose a conceptual model that posits ethno-racially differentiated park use as emerging from the interplay of historically and culturally contingent contexts of park provision; characteristics of park users; physical and ecological characteristics of park spaces; and how both users and non-users perceive those spaces. In the final section of the article we draw upon this conceptual model to consider how geographic research on parks might advance, and we suggest that new park studies can enhance broader cultural landscape, environmental justice and political ecology perspectives on urban nature-society relations.

## **II. Park studies in geography**

Geographers have made numerous contributions to the study of parks, but here we focus on two research themes around park-making as a socio-ecological project: (i) the ideology of park development—especially how parks were created as ‘culture-natures’ and used as technologies of social control and; (ii) how multiple axes of difference (e.g. race, class, gender) have historically configured park spaces. We limit our review primarily to park studies in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

### **1. Parks as elitist ‘culture-natures’**

The ‘park idea’ is infused with very specific beliefs about nature. Parks are in essence nature’s artifice—elaborate simulacra (Katz and Kirby, 1991; Willems-Braun, 1997).

Kenneth Olwig (1996) for example has traced the etymology of the word *park* to mean ‘enclosed’ or ‘captive’ nature, suggesting that urban parks are socially mediated ecologies with deep roots.<sup>2</sup> Parks originate from the aristocratic park and garden landscapes of ancient Greece, India, China, and the Middle-East; from European medieval deer parks; and more

recently from the elaborately landscaped estates of European gentry (see Wescoat, 1990, 1991).<sup>3</sup>

The first public parks began with the English aristocracy, who imported the pastoral aesthetic into London by creating residential squares (Lawrence, 1993).<sup>4</sup> They appropriated, privatized and forcibly enclosed these squares—park-like lands to which peasants (and indirectly the working class) had a traditional form of entitlement (c.f. Neumann, 1996). Subsequent conflicts over access to urban greenspace ultimately resulted in the opening of the Royal Parks to the public, and later in the creation of the English public parks—a pattern repeated elsewhere in Europe, and to some extent in the United States (Chadwick, 1966; Lasdun, 1992; Lawrence, 1993; Marne, 2001; Thompson, 1998).

But the impetus for the urban park movement exceeded mere aesthetics. Park reformers in the 19th century saw urban parks as medical technologies—Young (2004) calls them biological ‘machine[s] to transform a flawed society’—and as instruments of ecological modernization (see also Gandy, 2002; Szczygiel and Hewitt, 2000). Nineteenth century public health theories postulated that maladies were directly linked to landscape characteristics—especially wetlands and swamps. Vapors or ‘miasmas’ around ‘low-lying’ landscapes were believed to transmit diseases like cholera and typhoid (Driver, 1988; Lawrence, 1993; Szczygiel and Hewitt, 2000), and converting such land to parks was advocated as an effective remedy.

Park reformers shared a deterministic conception of nature (Domosh, 1992; Driver, 1988; Lawrence, 1993; Taylor, 1999; Young, 1996), convinced that social problems had environmental origins. Exposure to the right kind of nature would ‘uplift’ individuals, making them healthy, morally proper, socially responsible, economically prudent and intelligent (Baldwin, 1999; Cranz, 1978, 1982; Gagen, 2004; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992), whereas contact with untamed or miasmatic natures invited melancholia and corruption



(Baldwin, 1999; Driver, 1988; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992; Szczygiel and Hewitt, 2000). Park reformers thus imbued parks with the power to overcome anarchy, immorality, crime and indolence (Baldwin, 1999; Boyer, 1978; Schuyler, 1986; Young, 1996), and parks became in effect both the ‘lungs’ and ‘conscience of the city’ (French, 1973; Patmore, 1983).

Tracing the evolution of urban parks in the United States, Young (1995; 1996; 2001; 2004) revealed how parks like Golden Gate Park in San Francisco were progressively transformed as public health theories modernized and park-making discourses shifted first from therapeutic to ‘democratic’ concerns and then, with the 1930s burgeoning recreation movement, to effectiveness and efficiency concerns. Park space became functionally segregated into playgrounds, museums, outdoor concert venues and public garden spaces and increased in complexity.<sup>5</sup> Social mixing, moral uplift and physical fitness (both individual bodies and how those bodies ‘fit’ within society) became principle roles of parks (Cranz, 1978, 1982; Gagen, 2004; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992; Schenker, 1996; Schuyler, 1986). But social control remained the primary impetus behind park-making (Brownlow, 2006; Katz and Kirby, 1991; Taylor, 1999).

For example, the United States’ first public park-makers—Frederick Law Olmstead, Calvert Vaux, and their European contemporaries—argued that by increasing contact between the classes, parks would foster democratic inclusiveness (Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992). Yet, despite the rhetoric, industrial-age parks in England were rarely democratic spaces (Marne, 2001). The urban poor and ethnic minorities initially contested many English park-making projects—a situation that also occurred across the Atlantic. Tensions eventually escalated so high in several American parks, including Lincoln Park in Chicago and Griffith Park in Los Angeles, that ‘race riots’ erupted, spilling out from parks into surrounding neighborhoods (Davis, 2002; French, 1973; The Chicago Commission on Race Relations,

1922; Tuttle Jr., 1996). Rather than ‘melting pots’, many parks became ‘pressure cookers’ (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995).

## 2. Spaces of exclusion: class and race in the park

American park-makers radically altered urban ecologies. They used new industrial technologies to excavate rock, sculpt soil, relocate trees, fill wetlands, dam streams, and create lakes (Chadwick, 1966). In so doing, they displaced flora, fauna and people, and introduced a vast array of new species to fashion the ‘urban pastoral’ (Gandy, 2002; see also Bischoff, 1994; Spirn, 1984, 1996).<sup>6</sup> Gandy’s (2002) work on New York’s Central Park shows how the urban pastoral ideal impacted the livelihoods and wellbeing of the city’s poorest and most vulnerable residents (see also Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992).

Observing that Central Park was conceived as a microcosm of Jeffersonian pastoral values—family, nature, and social bonds—Gandy argues that the park was designed to impart civilizing sensibilities and enact elitist ideals of morality and refinement, creating a binary ‘moral geography’. Park makers constructed the park’s image as natural, sanctifying, wholesome and White, counterposing it against a city construed as artificial, profane, insalubrious, and colored (also see Baldwin, 1999; Domosh, 1992; Driver, 1988; Matless, 1997; 1998). Park making thus led to gentrification of blighted areas of the industrial city, displacing vulnerable residents, many of whom were poor and people of color (Baldwin, 1999; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992; Schuyler, 1986; Taylor, 1999).<sup>7</sup> African-American and Irish families, for example, were evicted from Seneca Village when it was razed to create Central Park. Like other early parks, Central Park was far from public transportation and beyond walking distance from working class tenements (Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992; Schuyler, 1986; Young, 1995).<sup>8</sup>

When public parks later became more accessible to a diverse clientele, park managers imposed strict behavioral rules and dress codes to inculcate cultural norms of the elite within working class and immigrant visitors (Cosgrove, 1995; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992; Taylor, 1999; Thompson, 1998). Park rules and park design constrained how such groups used early parks (Baldwin, 1999; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992; Schenker, 1996; Schuyler, 1986; Taylor, 1999). Moreover, many U.S. parks were even racially segregated. McKay (1954: 703) asserted that ‘racial differences [were] more pronounced in [parks] than in any other [spaces]’.

In many Southern states for example, Jim Crow ideologies led to racially segregated park systems, sometimes with separate park administrators (McKay 1954; Shearer, 1999; Taylor 1956; Washington 1928; Weyeneth, 2005). In Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, state park facilities were off limits to people of color. And in some states (e.g. Louisiana) the practice of racially segregating parks continued through the 1950s (Taylor 1956). Despite the segregationist doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ facilities for African-Americans, parks created for Blacks were smaller, received less funding, and had fewer facilities than those for Whites (McKay 1954; Meyer 1942; Shearer 1999). And such parks were typically located on the outskirts of town on land ill-suited for other development (Baldwin 1999; Foster 1999; Shearer 1999). While not legally segregated, many northern and mid-western cities also had separate parks for Whites and African-Americans, with people of color confined to a park-deprived urban core while Whites enjoyed a park-abundant suburban periphery (Kraus 1969). Within parks, swimming pools and beaches in these cities, discrimination was commonplace and often informally sanctioned by civic officials, even where racial segregation was illegal (Rabkin 1954; Byrne et al., 2007).

The exclusion of the poor and people of color was also a hallmark of the U.S. national park system; these parks were founded upon middle and upper class sensibilities and

eugenicist ideologies about pristine wilderness (Mels, 2002: 137-138). Wilderness ideals were complicit in the dispossession of Native Americans from land designated for national parks (Cosgrove, 1995; Spence, 1999), legitimized through quasi-scientific discourses of custodianship and stewardship (Chase, 1987; Spence, 1999). National parks, like zoos and agricultural shows, were spatially codified as distinctively ‘White natures’ (Anderson, 2003). For instance, Cosgrove (1995) linked the emergence of the U.S. national park movement to efforts to create a White nation with abundant natural capital, compensating for the perceived lack of Europe’s cultural sophistication (see also Grusin, 1998; Neumann, 1996; Spence, 1999). National parks also ‘represented the kind of environment in which earlier—and racially purer—immigrants were believed to have forged American identity’ (Cosgrove, 1995: 35).

Geographic studies of park-making as a socio-natural project reveal that historically, many parks were ideologically-charged spaces. Yet few geographers have studied the questions of who uses contemporary parks and for what purposes. Leisure researchers dominate the literature on park use in the United States, and they have found that people of color visit parks at lower rates than their White counterparts and use parks differently. What is surprising though, given the ideologies of park-making in the U.S., is that leisure researchers frame explanations for ethno-racially differentiated park use not as a function of park spaces, but simply as a function of the characteristics and preferences of park users.

### **III. Ethno-racially differentiated park use**

People visit parks for a wide variety of reasons, including tourism, recreation, exercise, relaxation, education, encountering nature, spirituality, self-expression, socializing, being with companion animals, escaping the city, and for solitude, personal development and to earn a living (Hayward, 1989; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; Manning and More, 2002; McIntyre et al., 1991). People also visit parks for illicit reasons—from the prosaic to the potentially

dangerous—including homelessness, voyeurism, exhibitionism, sexual gratification, drug use, thievery etc. (Kornblum, 1983; McDonald and Newcomer, 1973). Park activities are diverse, spanning both active recreation—e.g. walking (with companion animals), hiking, swimming, riding bicycles, running, jogging, and playing sports; and passive recreation—e.g. sun bathing, picnicking, painting, fishing, photography, reading, dancing, playing with children or animals, playing musical instruments, studying nature, and people-watching (Hayward, 1989). Although rights of passage occur in parks too (e.g. weddings, funerals and birthday parties) they are rarely mentioned in the literature (Gobster, 2002; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995 are notable exceptions). Importantly, many of these activities seem to be differentiated by race, ethnicity and nativity.

#### 1. Variations by race, ethnicity and nativity

Leisure researchers find that various ethno-racial groups exhibit distinct preferences for leisure settings, diverse reasons for visiting parks and favor different activities (for detailed reviews see Floyd, 2001; Husbands and Idahosa, 1995).<sup>9</sup> African-Americans reputedly enjoy more sociable, formal, sports-oriented, urban park settings, whereas Whites are said to focus on individualism and apparently prefer settings that offer secluded nature (Floyd and Shinew, 1999; Gobster, 2002; Ho et al., 2005; Hutchison, 1987; Johnson et al., 1998; Payne et al., 2002; Talbot and Kaplan, 1993; Taylor, 1989; Tierney et al., 2001; Virden and Walker, 1999; Washburn, 1978).<sup>10</sup> Asians appear to value ‘scenic beauty’ over recreational functionality (Gobster, 2002; Ho et al., 2005; Payne et al., 2002), whereas Latinos are said to desire ‘a more developed environment’ with good access to group facilities such as parking, picnic tables and restrooms (Baas et al., 1993: 526; see also Hutchison, 1987; Irwin et al., 1990).

Reasons for visiting parks also seem to vary by race / ethnicity. Several studies suggest that Whites may seek solitude and opportunities to exercise, African-Americans look for

organized recreation opportunities, Latinos seek to socialize, typically with extended family groups and also to enjoy ‘fresh air’, and Asians apparently favor park visits with extended family or organized groups, but also visit parks to escape social responsibilities and to exercise (Dwyer, 1997; Floyd et al., 1994; Gobster, 2002; Ho et al., 2005; Hutchison, 1987; Payne et al., 2002; Philipp, 1997; Sasidharan et al., 2005; Scott and Munson, 1994). But there are exceptions. Although Tierney et al. (2001: 275) noted that African-Americans are significantly less likely than other ethno-racial groups to visit natural areas like parks, Johnson et al. (1998) suggested this was not the case for African-Americans from rural areas.

With respect to park activities, Latinos putatively tend engage in sedentary and informal social activities such as picnicking, but also enjoy soccer, camping and hiking (Baas et al., 1993; Gobster, 2002; Hutchison, 1987; Sasidharan et al., 2005). African-Americans seem to enjoy sport and organized recreation like basketball, but also sitting, talking and walking (Dwyer, 1997; Floyd et al., 1994; McGuire et al., 1987; Payne et al., 2002; Sasidharan et al., 2005; Shinew et al., 2004a). Whites disproportionately appear to enjoy camping, hiking, hunting, boating, swimming, cycling and dog-walking (Baas et al., 1993; Floyd et al., 1994; Gobster, 2002). Studies of Asians emphasize preferences for strolling / walking, picnicking, fishing, volleyball and golf (Dwyer, 1997; Gobster, 2002; Payne et al., 2002; Sasidharan et al., 2005; Shinew et al., 2004a).<sup>11</sup>

And researchers have found that nativity may also influence park visitation and use. For example, Baas et al. (1993) found that Hispanics born in Mexico preferred clean, litter-free areas, whereas the native-born Latinos emphasized the importance of park safety.<sup>12</sup> And Shaull and Gramann (1998) found that first and second-generation Hispanic-Americans derived more family related and nature-related leisure benefits from parks than Anglos or third-generation Hispanic-Americans.

These empirical findings beg the question: ‘*why* do different groups visit and use parks in different ways?’ Within leisure research, the answers to this question revolve around the positionalities and cultural preferences of individual potential park users, rather than the characteristics of parks themselves.

## 2. Race / ethnicity park use theories and their limitations

Leisure theorists have advanced four interconnected explanations for ethno-racially differentiated park use, including: (i) marginality; (ii) race / ethnicity; (iii) assimilation and acculturation; and (iv) discrimination. According to marginality theory, people of color face socio-economic barriers that constrain when and how they visit and use parks (Washburn, 1978). For example, they may be transit-dependent, thus limiting access to parks near public transport routes or within easy walking distance of their homes (Scott and Munson, 1994). Lower incomes may relegate people of color to neighborhoods where parks may be scarce (see for example Floyd, 1999; Floyd et al., 1993; Hutchison, 1987; Johnson, 1998; Johnson et al., 1998; Lee et al., 2001; Woodard, 1988), and high entry fees may prevent some from accessing certain parks (More and Stevens, 2000; More, 2002; Scott and Munson, 1994).

Ethnicity theory asserts that people of color have distinctive ‘subcultural styles’, developed over successive generations, and these account for observed differences in leisure preferences and activities (Washburn, 1978). For example, some researchers suggest African-Americans and Latinos may be threatened by wild nature (Floyd et al., 1995; Virden and Walker, 1999) and prefer less management and law enforcement in parks (Gobster, 2002) due to their cultural backgrounds. In contrast, acculturation / assimilation explanations posit that people of color use parks differently because of their ethno-racial heritage and / or because they have not adjusted to or adopted the dominant values of mainstream society (Baas et al., 1993; Floyd et al., 1994; Ho et al., 2005; Hutchison, 1987; Johnson et al., 1998; Payne et al.,

2002; Shaull and Gramann, 1998; Tarrant and Cordell, 1999; Washburn, 1978; Woodard, 1988). Theorists expect that over time, newer groups will adopt the culture, behavior and norms of more dominant social groups (Floyd et al., 1993).

Discrimination may also explain ethno-racially differentiated park use. To paraphrase West (1989: 12-13): ‘prejudice and overt discrimination in public parks together with perceived hostility lead people of color to avoid parks where they feel unwelcome’ (see also Floyd, 1998; Floyd et al., 1993; Floyd and Johnson, 2002; Floyd et al., 1994; Gobster, 2002; Hester Jr. et al., 1999; Lee, 1972; Meeker et al., 1973; Philipp, 1997; 1999; Stodolska and Jackson, 1998; Tierney et al., 2001; Virden and Walker, 1999). When people of color experience discrimination in parks they may avoid using those parks or more generally alter how they use parks. Some who subscribe to this explanation suggest that changing the composition of park management staff to include more ‘minority’ representation will increase park use rates among people of color.

But all of these explanations are problematic. The marginality hypothesis privileges class, factoring in race only through past oppression (Floyd, 1998), failing to recognize how racism still functions as a vehicle of socio-economic domination (see Hall, 1980). Ethnicity theory often confounds race and ethnicity, conflate ethnicity with subculture, and / or regard ‘subcultural variations’ as a form of self-imposed differentiation (Floyd, 1998; Hutchison, 1988). The theory also essentializes and naturalizes race, and ignores within-group variations in custom, language, behavior, and norms etc.<sup>13</sup> The assimilation / acculturation theory suffers from Anglo-normativity, predicated on the assumption that ‘assimilation [is] inevitable and desirable’ (Floyd, 1999). Moreover, by ignoring racial oppression, often resulting in barriers to park access, this explanation misses how race shapes space.

Even the discrimination perspective has its faults. Proponents have tended to treat instances of discrimination in isolation, rather than as part of a social system based on racial

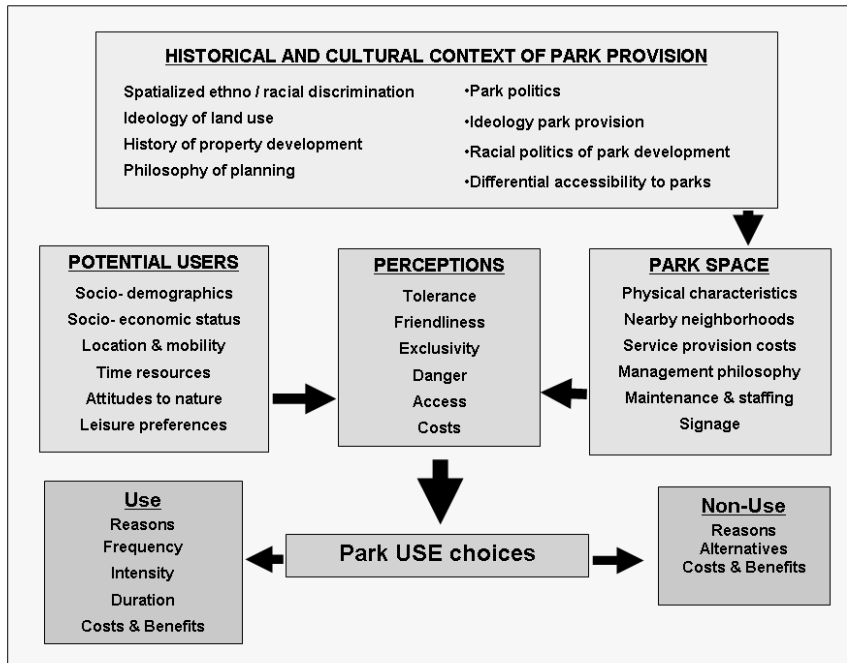


oppression. For example, although Shinew et al., (2004: 196) in their study of Chicago park users, found that: ‘parks and other public spaces tend to be color coded...reflecting[ing] a racialized social order’, they attributed this predominantly to sociological factors. Indeed, many exponents have failed to see how histories of racism might shape contemporary park design and use (Floyd, 1999; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995). For instance, Hutchison (1987 : 212, 220) observed ‘blacks in black parks, Hispanics in Hispanic parks and whites in white parks’ yet overlooked the reasons for such racial differentiation (see West, 1989: 12). Similarly, Gobster (1989: 12) found racial segregation in Lincoln Park, Chicago, but did not explicitly connect leisure preferences and experiences of discrimination with racial segregation. And despite findings that people of color travel further than Whites to visit many parks (e.g. Gobster, 2002; Payne et al., 2002) the role of racial segregation in residential location and park access has mostly been overlooked.

Thus, despite a long tradition of exploring ethno-racial differences in park use, most leisure studies have underestimated or simply ignored the spatial effects of systemic racism (Noe and Snow, 1989/90; Tierney et al., 2001). And leisure scholars tend to treat parks as homogeneous entities—vessels for human interaction, providing few insights into why for example, some parks attract certain people and repel others, or why some park users perceive certain park spaces as the territory of particular ethno-racial group(s), thus constraining their park use choices (e.g. Gobster, 2002; Gray, 1973; Johnson et al., 1998; Kornblum, 1983; Lee, 1972; National Park Service, 1975; Shinew et al., 2004a; West, 1989). Although some leisure researchers have begun to engage with space (e.g. Kornblum, 1983; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995), focusing upon notions of ‘territoriality’ or ‘place attachment’, these concepts remain peripheral and are poorly developed (e.g. Brooks et al., 2006; Moore and Scott, 2004; Payne et al., 2002; Stokowski, 2002; Williams, 2002). The challenge for geographers is how to reconceptualize ethno-racially differentiated park use to include space and place.

#### **IV. Reconceptualizing park use and accessibility**

What we require is a conceptual model that incorporates the insights of leisure scholars with those of geographers—essentially a spatially explicit understanding of park use.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on the cultural landscape, environmental justice and political ecology perspectives, we offer a model that seeks to explain park use as reliant on, but more than just a function of an individual’s socio-demographic characteristics. This model of park use incorporates four elements: (i) the socio-demographic characteristics of park users and nonusers—as suggested by leisure research; (ii) the political-ecology and amenities of the park itself—e.g. landscape design, vegetation, and facilities, features of surrounding neighborhoods and land uses, management regime, etc.; (iii) the historical and cultural landscapes of park provision—such as discriminatory land use practices, philosophy of park design, or politics of development and; (iv) individual perceptions of park spaces—e.g. accessibility, safety, conviviality, or sense of welcome, all mediated by personal characteristics, and the park’s political ecology, history, and cultural landscape (see figure 1). Together, these forces tend to produce spatially uneven development of park resources and access, typically to the detriment of communities of color and disadvantage, and thus disproportionately affecting their health and well-being.



**Figure 1 – Conceptual model**

Park use is closely associated with the pool of *potential park users*. Many socio-demographic variables influence park use, including age, sex, race, ethnicity and household composition, as well as socio-economic factors such as education, income levels, disability and home ownership. Other user-centered variables also potentially influence park use including residential location, physical mobility (e.g. car-ownership), time resources (e.g. working poor), attitudes towards nature, and leisure preferences. For example, Niepoth (1973) suggested that among other factors, physical fitness, age, income, time, knowledge / awareness, and skills are important correlates of park use.

The *park space* component of our conceptual framework emphasizes the importance of variables such as lighting, vegetation, topography, drainage, fencing, signage and maintenance and the character of nearby neighborhoods—together with ambient characteristics like temperature and precipitation—as potential determinants of park use (Bonaiuto et al., 1999; Burger, 2003; Burgess et al., 1988; Fletcher, 1983; Floyd et al., 1994;

Flynn et al., 1994; Gobster, 1998, 2002; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; Loukaitou-Sideris and Stieglitz, 2002; Perez-Verdin et al., 2004; Philipp, 1999; Ruddick, 1996; Steg and Sievers, 2000; Whitzman, 2002). For example, Hayward (1989) found that potential users of Boston's Franklin Park reported that because they lacked information about park facilities etc. they did not use some areas of the park; Scott and Munson (1994: 87) reported similar findings. Signs and rules may codify Anglo-normativity; 'soccer prohibited' signs might reflect both a shortage of park space and racially-based attitudes about who belongs and what constitutes appropriate use of park space (Martin, 2004).

Both park user characteristics and park features may affect *perceptions of parks* and the people who use those spaces, among potential users. Parks may be perceived as welcoming, safe, and accessible, or intolerant of difference, for example, thereby influencing use patterns. The same park also may be perceived differently by different people, depending on their backgrounds (see Gollege and Stimson, 1997). Following (Sibley, 1999), people of color may perceive some urban parks as for 'whites-only' or feel apprehensive about visiting certain park destinations because they must traverse space that is mostly White, and thus potentially hostile (e.g. Gould and White, 1986; Lee, 1972; Meeker et al., 1973; West, 1993).

Perceptions of danger or discomfort may be linked to lower levels of utilization of urban public spaces like parks (Hester Jr. et al., 1999; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; Loukaitou-Sideris and Stieglitz, 2002; Ravenscroft and Markwell, 2000; Rishbeth, 2001). Westover (1985) and Madge (1985) have emphasized how perception mediates potential park users' attitudes towards park safety, feelings of belonging and notions of incivility. If people are going to use parks—especially the socially disadvantaged—parks must be seen as safe, welcoming, well-maintained, physically appealing, catering for a range of activities, and fostering social interaction (e.g. French, 1973; Gray, 1973; McDonald and Newcomer, 1973). Perceived expense may also influence park use, irrespective of actual entrance fees or other costs. And

the presence of park security, law enforcement personnel or rangers can influence perceptions of safety or belonging—both positively and negatively (see Rishbeth, 2001).

Park design may also impact how people perceive and thus use them. The cultural landscape perspective reveals that most American parks have been designed according to Anglo-Celtic landscape aesthetics—i.e. language of park signage, layout of the park space, landscaping (Baas et al., 1993; Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005; Gold, 1986; Rishbeth, 2001), which may not attract foreign-born visitors (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995; Loukaitou-Sideris and Stieglitz, 2002). Diverse park visitors may also perceive park landscaping characteristics (e.g. type of vegetation or density of planting) as being unwelcoming or even potentially hostile and unsafe, while park design features themselves may mirror cultural and ethno-racial ideologies about the appropriate appearance and use of space. Nast (2006) also contends that the presence of dogs in parks may negatively influence park perceptions and use among people of color.

Our conceptual framework recognizes the overarching *historical and cultural context of park provision* and its role in shaping park supply and the character of parks. In particular the history of racial prejudice that has been central to park-making projects in many American cities; a history reflected in inequitable patterns of park provision (Gobster, 1998, 2002; Virden and Walker, 1999). Larger parks offering more recreational opportunities are oftentimes found in predominantly White neighborhoods, reflecting patterns of racialized suburbanization (Hurley, 1995), while park use choices among people of color may reflect deeply ingrained fears of racial harassment based on historical and/or lived experience (Ravenscroft and Markwell, 2000; Rishbeth, 2001; see also Shinew et al., 2004b).

The racial ideology of park provision may significantly affect both the character of park landscapes and how potential users perceive them. Cultural landscape analysis reveals that racial ideologies are mobilized and instantiated within urban landscapes such as parks

through symbolic and material coordinates, ranging from park signs to police beatings (e.g. Anderson, 1987; 2002; Anderson, 2003; Bender, 2001; Cosgrove, 1995; Endfield and Nash, 2002; Eves, 2005; Kenny, 1995; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000; Mahtani, 2001; Nash, 1996; Peake and Ray, 2001). Greenspaces, for example, can become racialized over time, with ‘outsider’ racial groups coming to be seen as being out of place in natural areas (Katz and Kirby, 1991; Nash, 1996; Rose et al., 1997).

The racial politics of park development reflects ideologies of land use, histories of property development, planning philosophy, and the spatial expression of racial discrimination. Racialization may occur through the legal and symbolic inscription of space, for example land titles, restrictive covenants, zoning and redlining, and representational registers such as post cards, advertising, color schemes, street trees, murals and architectural embellishments (Delaney, 1998; 2001; 2002; Gotham, 2000; Lands, 2004; Nickel, 1997; Power, 1983; Ross and Leigh, 2000; Schein, 1997). For example, Duncan and Duncan (2003) examined landscape production in suburban New York and found that although Latinos are needed to maintain the aestheticized nature of the suburban pastoral, they are excluded from many of the rights, privileges and benefits enjoyed by White residents. These include affordable housing, access to shopping, places of worship and rights to use some public spaces. The result is a racialization of landscapes, including parks and open space.

The attributes of potential park-users, park users’ perceptions, and racialized park landscapes embedded within their historical and cultural context, may influence *park use choices*. Some residents may decide to use parks, others will not. *Park use* patterns—frequency, duration, intensity etc.—may vary systematically based on based on many of the factors already identified and also due to idiosyncratic factors such as personal motivation and perceived benefits and costs of use in light of alternatives. However, the historical, socio-ecological, and racialized context within which parks and parks users are embedded may

result in *non-use*, or avoidance of parks altogether, with a concomitant substitution of alternative venues for recreation and leisure.

What is critically important to recognize is that despite their deployment as technologies of social control and tutelage, parks can nonetheless benefit urban residents in very real ways (for a detailed discussion see Driver et al., 1991). Research across many fields demonstrates that park use can:

- Mitigate sedentary lifestyles associated with obesity, coronary heart disease and several types of cancer (e.g. Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005; Ho et al., 2005; Orsega-Smith et al., 2004), speed recovery for patients recuperating from surgery, and assuage anxiety (de Vries et al., 2003; Kaplan, 2001; Kleiber et al., 2002; Kuo, 2001; Maller et al., 2005);
- Improve mental health by providing psychological relief from the stresses of city life (Ulrich, 1979, 1984; Ulrich and Addoms, 1981; Ulrich et al., 1990; Ulrich et al., 1991; Hung and Crompton, 2006; Kaplan, 2001; Kaplan et al., 2004; Kuo, 2001; Orsega-Smith et al., 2004);
- Enhance food security and access to quality food, since community gardens are a recent feature of many inner city parks (Barnett, 2001; Maller et al., 2005; Nuru and Korschink, 2000; Swanson, 2005; Tittle, 2002; Blair-Lewis et al., 2005);
- Increase property values, improve socialization, promote child development and mitigate incivility (Aminzadeh and Afshar, 2004; Crewe, 2001; Gobster, 2001; Gray, 1973; Harnik, 2000; Heynen, 2006; Jones and Wills, 2005; Manning and More, 2002; Mitchell, 1995; Mitchell and Staeheli, 2005; Pincetl, 2003); and
- Provide ecosystem services benefits, including regulation of ambient temperatures, air filtration, noise reduction, habitat provision and protection of biodiversity, carbon

sequestration, and storm-water infiltration (see Bolund and Hunhammar, 1999; Burgess et al., 1988; Heynen, 2006; McIntyre et al., 1991; Swanwick et al., 2003).

Yet the uneven development of park space means that these multiple benefits of parks are not equally accessible. People of color are especially likely to encounter problems in accessing parks, and this has emerged as a compelling environmental justice issue (e.g. Byrne et al., 2007; Wolch et al., 2005). Homeless people, the poor, and other groups (such as skateboarding youth) are often systematically excluded from urban parks, while others are deterred due to lack of easy access or negative perceptions linked to park history, associations, and attributes (Mitchell, 1995; Smith, 2002; Weller, 2003; Mitchell and Steheli, 2005, Brownlow, 2005, 2006; Byrne et al, 2007).

For example, in Los Angeles' low-income neighborhoods and those dominated by people of color, African-Americans and Latinos have dramatically lower levels of access to park resources than predominantly White suburban areas of the city. Moreover, the suburban periphery is bolstered by new parks and receives more park-funding than the park-deprived core (Wolch et al 2005). And the nation's largest urban national park, parts of which lie just 8 miles from downtown Los Angeles, is surrounded by White neighborhoods that may act as a barrier to people of color wishing to access this park (Byrne et al., forthcoming). Thus many people of color may be systematically denied access to the multiple benefits that parks confer upon their users, with consequent negative impacts upon community health and well-being.

Our conceptual model, rooted in environmental justice, political-ecology, and cultural landscape approaches, provides fertile terrain for new geographic research on parks and their uneven development. Following Robbins (2004: 216), who argues that it is imperative that we trace 'flows...of garbage, trees, energy, runoff, and disease through built urban space'—to see who wins and who loses in the spatial and political-economic allocation of



environmental harms and benefits—we raise a number of questions for future geographic research on parks.

For instance, do cultural norms and values, experiences of racial hostility and histories of paternalistic park design affect the way women of color perceive and use certain parks (e.g. Eyler et al., 2002; Madge, 1997; Nies, 1999)? The interactions between race, gender and perceptions of safety may configure recreational activities and shape access to park spaces in ways that are poorly understood (Fletcher, 1983; Koskela, 1999; Ruddick, 1996; Westover, 1985). Recent political ecology analyses of parks indicate that gender can play a major role in delimiting access to urban greenspace and reveal that multiple axes of difference can exacerbate environmental injustice. Fusions of gender, class and race can seriously diminish access to environmental goods and services like parks (Heynen, 2003; 2006; Heynen and Perkins, 2005; Huang et al., 2002; Pezzoli, 2002; Swyngedouw, 1996). For example, Brownlow (2005, 2006), in his analysis of Fairmont Park in Philadelphia, illustrates how women of color became especially vulnerable to attack in parks. Interactions between vulnerability, violence and neoliberal reforms to park management reduced operating budgets and park maintenance, promoted weed infestation and vegetation densification—particularly adjoining neighborhoods of color (see also Madge, 1997; Valentine, 1991; Whitzman, 2002) and resulted in dramatic increases in violent crimes towards women.<sup>15</sup>

Another set of questions concern the potential role played by historical patterns of racism in shaping the contemporary distribution of parks and recreation facilities in urban areas. Such patterns are not static and may interact with non-park related opportunities such as movie theatres, fast-food hang-outs, video game arcades, or shopping centres to influence park-use propensities. Do they also differentially affect park use in racially-distinct neighborhoods (e.g. Fesenmaier and Lieber, 1985; Scott and Munson, 1994; Smith, 1980)? Some differences may arise due to information constraints. We know very little about how

potential park users obtain information about local park opportunities—for example, whether they circulate unevenly and through different channels? Tierney et al. (2001) suggest they do, noting that Latinos rely more on social networks to get access about urban wildlands in Los Angeles than do Whites, and may be constrained as a result (also see Spotts and Stynes, 1985). And while we know that park attributes may shape park use, the extent to which they differentially impact potential user groups is largely unknown, as is the extent of uneven access to specific park facilities designed for recreation and play—another potential environmental justice concern.

Such work is critical if we are to understand the extent of inequitable access to urban greenspace. But geographers also need to investigate new configurations of environmental injustice. For instance, climate-change has recently emerged as an environmental justice concern (Adger, 2001; Adger and Kelly, 1999; Mendelsohn et al., 2005; Patz et al., 2005). How will traditionally park-deprived communities fare under anticipated climate change impacts? Will people of color who already lack access to parks in their neighborhoods suffer from compounded difficulties though increased heat-island effects and be denied relief that parks offer if available park-space is distant, dangerous or exclusionary? Or will policy-makers be mobilized by climate change threats and grassroots pressure to create new greenspace in under-served areas?

Last, park users are agents and can leave their own imprints on parklands. But little geographic research explores activism around urban parks, especially by those marginalized by virtue of racial, gender, or class disadvantage. What role, for example, are people of color playing in reshaping their access to active recreation areas and urban nature? Recent research by Byrne et al. (2007) on the history of inner-city park supply and funding in Los Angeles shows that long-term political, cultural and economic contestations over nature and its benefits may produce ethno-racial differentials in park access and use. Although earlier park

developments were influenced by the conviction that parks could quell civil unrest and gang activities and simultaneously rejuvenate urban nature, plans for park expansion prompted the community to mobilize around alternative park visions. These questions and more remain open for geographers to explore.

## **V. Conclusion**

Park histories, ideologies and ecologies arise within a complex urban recreational landscape. Parks have historically functioned as spaces of social control—disciplining working class and racialized bodies, and redirecting ethno-racial and class tensions. Explanations of park use from leisure studies (as well as public health) lack historical specificity and do not account for the spatiality of parks.

Although geographic literature on how people use parks is relatively scarce, there are encouraging signs that this is beginning to change and that geographers have begun to address this conceptual and empirical gap. One of the most significant trends is geographers' recognition that parks are urban spaces with considerable potential to offset the social and environmental problems facing cities in the new millennium. Geographers also have been at the forefront of studies examining public space and the various factors affecting people's perceptions of belonging and meaning in the urban environment. As cities are recast as socio-natural spaces whose ecologies matter, geographers are well-positioned to make a significant contribution to future research on the socio-ecological role of urban parks, and have begun to take up this challenge.

By studying parks, geographers can also refine our understanding of broader nature-society relations. The environmental justice, cultural landscape and political ecology literatures in particular, have highlighted problems associated with urban parks, especially the public health and ecological consequences of the uneven spatial distribution of greenspace

within cities. But although these perspectives have much to offer each other, few geographers have attempted to harness them together (along with findings from leisure research) to sharpen theoretical insights on nature-society relations. For example, political ecology and related literatures are strong on structures and institutions but downplay individual agency. But drawing on leisure research, recent studies of parks have broadened the political ecology approach to show that individuals often play a major role in structuring how communities access nature and its benefits, and are changing how we conceptualize the spatial distribution of vulnerability and environmental injustice. Some of these same studies (e.g. Pulido, 2000) have also broadened our understanding of environmental injustice itself. Others have shifted our gaze away from exposure to harm to include inequities in access to environmental amenities and ecosystem services, thus enriching how we understand the spatial distribution of environmental risks and benefits. Finally, the cultural landscape perspective shows us how landscapes can become racialized, shifting the scale of environmental injustice from the home, the factory or the neighborhood to entire landscapes, thus reorienting and broadening our ambitions for just environmental outcomes in the city.

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## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize that park-making as a colonial project is important (Cosgrove, 1995; Driver, 1988; Endfield and Nash, 2002; Kenny, 1995; Eves, 2005; Neumann, 1996), but these considerations lie beyond the scope of our paper.

<sup>2</sup> This definition is problematic because it encompasses ant farms, window boxes and swimming pools. But the definitional slipperiness of the park concept shows us how these recreational spaces should not be taken for granted.

<sup>3</sup> Geographer Ellen Churchill Semple (1929) was one of the first to consider the *nature* of parks. Her examination of ancient Mediterranean parks and gardens was richly descriptive, detailing complex social ecologies. Semple linked park-making with the cultural practices of urban elites.

<sup>4</sup> Parks in the United States—including commons, squares, pleasure grounds and public parks—trace their heritage to European antecedents, with the exception of the national park, a uniquely American invention.

<sup>5</sup> Sociologist Gaalen Cranz (1983) noted that parks eventually evolved into four main types based on their function—pleasure ground, reform park, recreation facility and open space system. Each had distinctive attributes promoting specific activities (e.g. pleasure gardens promoted social intercourse whereas recreation facilities fostered physical exercise). Recently, ecological parks have joined the typology.

<sup>6</sup> Deer parks were especially influential: nobles who forcibly displaced peasants from traditional farmlands to create their hunting estates bequeathed a distinctive ‘nature’ aesthetic—scattered copses of large trees (sheltering deer from the elements) underlain by grassy meadows (launds i.e. lawn), a bucolic nature that nineteenth century park makers sought to emulate (Taylor, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> People of color were also excluded from working on many park development projects (Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Early fares for public transportation were beyond the means of many working class residents (Baldwin, 1999; DeBlasio, 2001; Hall, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> There is much confusion within the leisure studies literature about the differences between race and ethnicity. We distinguish between the two on the basis that ethnicity refers to putative socio-cultural distinctiveness between populations—i.e. food preferences, norms and mores, religion, music, clothing etc., whereas race is a construct focusing on purported physiognomic distinctiveness—e.g. hair, skin color, facial features etc. Like Omi and Winant (1994), we affirm that there is no biological basis to race.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson et al. (1998) found that in rural areas, African-Americans prefer hunting and fishing and poor African-Americans visit forests in greater numbers than poor Whites.

<sup>11</sup> Gobster (2002) noted that there are large within-group differences, which he attributes to ethnicity / nationality.

<sup>12</sup> Hispanic is a US census category that refers to Spanish-speaking people who originate from or have Latin-American ancestry (e.g. Mexico, Puerto-Rico, Guatemala, El Salvador etc.). People are classed by the US Census Bureau as White or Black Hispanic. Latino is a self-identifying ethno-racial category comprised of Spanish-speaking people who originate from, identify with, or possess Central and South American ancestry.

<sup>13</sup> On a positive note, some proponents of this perspective recognize that constructs like ‘Latino’ are problematic; as Carr and Williams (1993) stated ‘there is no ‘Hispanic monolith’ using the forests’.

<sup>14</sup> Conceptual frames from leisure research as well as public health lack historical specificity, focus on park users, have limited conceptualizations of race, and only superficially consider space and place (see Gomez, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> In contrast, studies in wildland settings have shown how the black male body may be branded as inherently dangerous and ‘out of place’ (see Burgess et al., 1988; Hester Jr. et al., 1999; Loukaitou-

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Sideris, 1995; Loukaitou-Sideris and Stieglitz, 2002; Madge, 1997; Nicholls, 2001; Ravenscroft and Markwell, 2000; Rishbeth, 2001; Smoyer-Tomic et al., 2004).