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Hmong Americans and Public Lands in Minnesota and Wisconsin

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Introduction

Natural resource managers and policy-makers need to understand the cultures and perspectives of ethnic minority communities in order to serve them effectively. In this exploratory study, we focus on Hmong Americans, perhaps the least-studied and -understood Asian ethnic group in the United States. The Hmong, who lived in the mountains of Laos, were relatively isolated until they were secretly recruited and armed by the United States Central Intelligence Agency in the early 1960s to fight the communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies (Warner 1998). When the Americans abruptly withdrew from Vietnam and Laos and the pro-American Royal Laotian government collapsed in 1975, the Hmong fled persecution and annihilation from the new communist regime.

Laotian Hmong refugees came to the United States in the years following the war in Vietnam and Laos. The number of Hmong refugees grew rapidly in the late 1970s and reached a peak of about 27,000 admitted to the United States in 1980. The Hmong are now the third-largest Southeast Asian group in the U.S. after Vietnamese and Cambodian, with the largest Hmong populations in California (65,095), Minnesota (41,800) and Wisconsin (33,791) (HNDI and HCRC 2004). All other states have a combined total of only 28,742 Hmong.

Yang (2001) documents the significant accomplishments in education, political participation, business, and government that Hmong Americans have achieved in a short amount of time. But overall, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that Hmong Americans lag significantly behind the general population in many social and economic indicators. Fennelly and Palasz (2003:103) note the “acute disadvantage of Hmong residents” compared with other immigrant groups in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Natural resource-related activities such as hunting, fishing, and gathering edible plants are important cultural and economic activities for a relatively high percentage of Hmong. But a lack of knowledge about hunting and fishing regulations among a minority of Hmong hunters and anglers, language barriers, and traditional Hmong hunting practices, such as hunting in large groups, have resulted in occasional clashes with hunters, property owners, and conservation officers (Price 1995).

These long-standing tensions have become more intense recently as a result of a tragic hunting incident in Wisconsin on November 21, 2004 (see *Hmong Today* 2005; Associated Press 2005). Chai Soua Vang was found sitting in a deer stand on private land and was con-

fronted by a group of white hunters. The chain of events that caused this confrontation to become violent are under dispute, but the result was the fatal shooting of six of the white hunters and wounding of two others by Chai Soua Vang. This incident sparked racially charged harassment of the Hmong communities in Wisconsin and Minnesota (Asian Week 2005).

The objective of this study was to listen to the Hmong American community and learn about their experiences, perspectives, needs, and concerns related to public lands. The ultimate goal is to help land managers, planners, and policy-makers be more responsive to the needs of Hmong and to better serve the Hmong community. We conducted a series of five focus groups with Hmong Americans in late 2005 through early 2006, one in St. Paul, Minnesota, two in La Crosse, Wisconsin, and two in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. All of these communities have significant Hmong populations. Separate groups were held for men and women in La Crosse and Eau Claire (the St. Paul group had one woman participant), because of gender roles in Hmong culture. The focus groups were moderated by male and female Hmong public health professionals who had past experience and training in focus group methods, and they were held in familiar, comfortable locations. See Bengston et al. (2007) for details about the focus groups and data analysis.

Activities

Focus group participants described a wide range of activities they enjoy on public lands. These included most of the activities that would likely be mentioned by any group, except that some of the women mentioned gathering edible plants and there was a strong emphasis on extended family and community gatherings, such as the Hmong New Year celebration. The most frequently mentioned activities, in order of frequency of mention, were “family fun” (i.e., our label for non-specific family activities), fishing, hunting, hiking/walking, and picnicking/barbecuing.

What’s special about favorite public lands?

When asked what was special about their favorite public lands, participants talked about places that were relaxing and peaceful, allowed you to be close to nature, were close to home, reminded them of Laos, and where they receive less harassment and discrimination. A woman described the way in which visiting public lands relieves the stress of everyday life: “No wonder why men like to go hunting, because they say when they are outdoors they forget about everything. When you get there, it is like they say. You don’t remember about the stress at home.” When discussing lands that remind them of their homeland in Laos, the memories were often bittersweet because these places also reminded them of loved ones who died during the war or fleeing the communists, or were left behind. Several participants mentioned that they prefer public lands where the managers or others are welcoming and treat them with respect and kindness.

Positive and negative experiences

Positive experiences described by our participants were universal in character, similar to the good times that many people experience on public lands, e.g., enjoyable times with one’s

family, teaching little brothers how to fish, and seeing the northern lights for the first time. A number of women described good experiences on public lands as being with their children and families.

Although participants described good times on public lands, conversations about these experiences were scant compared to discussion of negative experiences. Negative experiences revolved around incidents of racism, discrimination, and harassment from public land managers, recreationists, and private landowners. The following quote illustrates the types of comments expressed about discrimination from public land managers: “I like fishing and it is like that with fishing too. They discriminate against us Asians also. They check our licenses, but they do not ask as frequently with the white people.”

Harassment from other recreationists was also frequently mentioned and included the use of racial slurs and other verbal harassment, attempts to bully or intimidate and, as shown in the following quotation, attempts to steal fish and game from Hmong anglers and hunters: “The third time we went hunting at 72 and we shot another buck and they tried to come again to steal the deer just like before. He said, ‘You Hmong do not know the rules of hunting. This deer was mine and you shot it.’”

Women in our focus groups often described harassment from private landowners related to gathering special forest products. Encounters with private landowners near public land were described as tense and often involved verbal harassment and angry confrontations. Many women mentioned being yelled at by landowners, and two women described landowners sending out their dogs to scare them away.

Needs and concerns

In addition to widespread concern about racism and harassment, focus group participants expressed a variety of other concerns and needs. Low literacy rates were often mentioned as a problem for Hmong using public lands because many elders and new refugees are unable to read signs or books of rules and regulations. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources offers special classes for Hmong in hunting education and firearms safety classes through its Southeast Asian Outreach Program, but there is a need for more classes and more teachers (Hmong Times Online 2005). Similar classes are offered by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Problems with signage were also frequently discussed, beyond the inability of some Hmong to read them. Signs explaining the entrance fees and rules of public lands were considered confusing and too small to notice for those unfamiliar with such signs. There was confusion about the boundaries separating public and private lands due to inadequate signage, as well as confusion about the rules and laws governing each type of land. Fear of the possible consequences of accidentally trespassing on private lands was high among our participants. The problem of user fees being too high for some families, especially new refugees, was also brought up. Inadequate parking and unsanitary restrooms were mentioned by a few, but these concerns were at the bottom of the list for our focus group participants.

Suggestions for improvement

Many suggestions were offered for better meeting the needs of the Hmong community and improving their experiences on public lands. A high priority was cultural training for

public land managers about the Hmong and other minority groups. This suggestion was made many times. Participants expressed the belief that cultural training would help land managers and others be more open minded and reduce bias.

Another frequent suggestion was for land management agencies to hire more ethnic and minority employees, including Hmong. For example, one participant suggested hiring minorities to meet and greet people at state parks, to make minority visitors feel welcome and solicit suggestions from them. Someone else stressed the importance of Hmong park employees to help ensure that Hmong elders and others who are not fluent in English know the rules and know how to use the parks appropriately.

Many participants suggested a variety of types of training for Hmong, including classes on hunting safety and rule changes for hunting and fishing. Many of our participants were either unaware of such classes or expressed the need for wider availability. Women also brought up the need for separate classes for women because of the different ways in which they use public lands: "There needs to be specific training. For the women who are gathering greens, how do you go and gather? ... If there is training for hunters that only targets men. But women do not know about private lands."

Participants recognized that public land management agencies would likely be unable to meet all the needs for training and that Hmong must also train themselves. Some suggested that Hmong leadership must take a more active role in promoting responsible use of public lands, which is consistent with the importance of community and clan leaders in Hmong culture.

Other suggestions included the need for improved and more signs to explain the rules, including signs with pictures or symbols for those who cannot read. Several people volunteered to help translate for Hmong who don't speak English if there is a communication problem with land managers. A solution offered for the problem of unaffordable fees was to have occasional free days for low-income visitors.

Finally, two suggestions that were repeatedly made by our participants were that people (1) not assume that all Hmong are guilty of breaking the rules because of the actions of a small minority, and (2) speak kindly to the Hmong rather than getting angry and yelling. Many of our participants felt that the Hmong were unfairly stereotyped as rule breakers and they were saddened or frustrated by this characterization.

Special needs of new refugees

About 15,000 Hmong have come to the United States in recent years from Wat Tham Krabok in Thailand, with more than half of the new refugees coming to Minnesota and Wisconsin. Almost half of the adult Hmong immigrants are expected to start hunting (Hmong Times Online 2005). Our participants had great concern for these new refugees and wanted us to understand their special needs. They told us that new refugees often lack basic knowledge about public lands and how to use them. Common themes were the absence of hunting and fishing regulations in their homeland in Laos and different attitudes toward acceptable use of land in refugee camps in Thailand. Participants frequently mentioned the need for special and intensive training for new refugees, especially about the rules of hunting and fishing, hunting safety, and distinguishing between public and private lands. Many of the new

refugees were worried about accidentally breaking the rules and long-time residents were concerned about conflict that could arise from new refugees' lack of knowledge. Several participants also suggested pairing up new refugees with experienced and trained mentors, or "buddies," to teach them the rules and regulations. Others stressed the importance of communicating with new refugees about the use of public lands through the local Hmong community association. These organizations were viewed as vital communication links for new refugees.

The low income of new refugees was seen as a potential barrier to their participation in some activities on public lands, unless the Hmong long-time residents who invite them to go are able to pay for licenses, fees, and other expenses. Finally, participants emphasized the importance of treating new refugees with kindness and patience.

Fallout from the Chai Soua Vang case

The Chai Soua Vang case was the "elephant in the room" throughout our focus group discussions. Although we did not ask about this case, participants were eager to discuss its repercussions on their use of public lands. Several participants mentioned the need to be more cautious and walk away from potential conflict. Many people expressed the view that harassment of Hmong had increased. A surprising finding was that, at least in some situations, white hunters were fearful of Hmong and therefore more respectful after the Chai Soua Vang incident. Several long-time residents expressed deep concern about the potential for "another Chai Vang incident" involving new refugees.

Conclusions and implications

Our participants revealed deep cultural and personal connections with nature and public lands. Favorite public lands evoked both pleasant and painful memories of their homeland in Laos and were valued in many ways. Hunting, fishing, and gathering activities have high subsistence value to many. But perhaps of deeper significance is the role of public lands in maintaining Hmong culture. Participating in traditional activities on public lands gives Hmong a sense that they are preserving their culture by connecting with aspects of their time-honored way of life and the beliefs and values associated with it (Kolyk 1998).

We also heard about profound problems and concerns. Harassment directed at Hmong on public lands is common. These problems have existed since the Hmong first arrived in the U.S. but have intensified after the Chai Soua Vang incident. Tensions are high and the public lands that Hmong have sought out to relieve stress are now stressful places. Several people mentioned that they have quit hunting or fishing because of harassment or the potential for conflict.

The experiences of Hmong on public lands appear to be part of a larger pattern of intercultural and interracial tension experienced by many other minority groups (see Gramann 1996 and Schelhas 2002 for reviews of race, ethnicity, and natural resources). Solutions to these problems will take much time and effort on the part of public land managers in partnership with Hmong leaders and the Hmong community.

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