The Community of Member-Based Nature Parks:

An Integration of Spatial, Demographic, and Interview Data

Thesis Proposal

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**Abstract** American ideology hasbeen marked by its social construction of the biophysical world. Park creation and use is intertwined with these larger American social concepts of nature. While research on parks and park use commonly focuses upon the perceived physical and psychological benefits of and constraints to outdoor recreation at the national and public park level, this paper examines a virtually neglected area of analysis: member-based nature parks. Given available research, this paper suggests that such member-based nature parks may only be serving a particular spatial and socio-demographic segment of a community and, therefore, may be a source of inequality if an entire community, or a significant subgroup within that community, is unable to reap the physical, psychological, or other perceived benefits from nature center use. Additionally, because many of these smaller member-based nature parks receive funding from national, state, and/or local government agencies, some nature recreation programs, funds, and policies may not be reaching their maximum effectiveness. To that end, this thesis empirically explores the environmental inequality of participation in member-based nature centers, along with nature centers’ ties to the larger American ideological structure in two ways. First, community users are assessed through analysis of integrated spatial and demographic information of member zip codes gathered from a nature center in Texas. Once integrated, this data is explored through spatial analysis to determine where the largest amounts of members reside and what specific community markers, if any, are present. This enables this study to draw conclusions about the spatial distribution of nature center members and the community in which they live. Second, member views of how nature is socially constructed as it relates to park use are ascertained through interviews collected from a sample of the nature centermembers. Using this qualitative component, I will highlight the construction of nature as it relates to park use and combine this with numerical data on membership in the nature center community.