

“A Self-Discovery Adventure”: The Influence of American Wilderness on Hmong
Refugee Identity Formation

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the
Department of Sociology
The Colorado College
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Arts
May 2012

Rachel Hedlund
Spring 2012

On my honor
I have neither given nor received
unauthorized aid on this thesis.

Rachel Hedlund
Spring 2012

Acknowledgements

I would like my thesis advisor, Sandi Wong, for advising me throughout this entire process. Thank you for allowing me to explore a topic I'm passionate about—writing this thesis truly acted as a way to reflect on my four years at Colorado College as a Sociology major. I would also like to thank the entire Sociology department, as each and every class I've taken has taught me so much and changed me for the better.

To my friends, thank you for providing me with the much needed breaks throughout this process. To my mom, dad and Anne, thank you for your constant support and for letting me explore my passions in college.

To YMCA Camp Menogyn, thank you for providing me with my own self-discovery process on my canoe trips growing up. I wouldn't be who I am today without my wilderness experiences.

And finally, to Lee Vue, who is my inspiration for this thesis. Thank you for spending all of those days paddling with me and for teaching me so much about your incredible and beautiful culture. Nagligivaget, my dear friend.

Abstract

Although there is an emerging body of literature on ethnic groups and natural resource use in America, there is not much research regarding specific ethnic groups and their interactions with the American wilderness. This thesis explores the relationship between the American social constructions of wilderness and a specific refugee population in America—the Hmong people. Interviews were conducted with participants in the Twin Cities of Minnesota with conversations focusing on identity and wilderness interactions. These interviews revealed that the Hmong, a Southeast Asian people with a deeply rooted connection to nature interact with the wilderness in ways that differ from the American norm. Yet, through segmented assimilation, younger generations of Hmong have also acculturated to the American perception of wilderness as a place of self-discovery.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Hmong Background.....	2
Literature Review.....	5
<i>Assimilation and Identity Formation</i>	5
<i>Wilderness in America</i>	9
<i>Natural Resource Use and Ethnic Groups</i>	13
Methods.....	17
Analysis.....	18
<i>Ethnic Identifiers through Aspects of Former Lives</i>	18
<i>Utilization of Natural Resources Mentality</i>	23
<i>Religion and Spiritual Connections to Nature</i>	27
<i>Connection to American Values and Attitudes of Wilderness</i>	32
<i>Identity Formation and Identification within Society</i>	36
Conclusion.....	39
Bibliography.....	43
Appendix.....	46

“And I loved that feeling of going back and having a sense of tranquility and a sense of knowing that when I come back here, this is who I am, this is who I know I am.”

Introduction

My first personal introduction to the Hmong culture occurred on a 30-day canoe trip with my YMCA wilderness tripping camp in Northern Minnesota. As I paddled with my Hmong friend, I learned about the challenges immigrants and their descendants face as they adjust to and become part of a different society. My friend’s desire to participate on these 4 and 7 week long canoeing trips (where the same clothes were worn each day and a shower was considered a daily dip in the lake) was something unfathomable to her parents. Having worked so hard to get to America to provide her and her siblings with a better future and greater opportunities, her parents could not understand why she wanted to escape to a Canadian wilderness that reminded them of their former lives in Laos.

But she, like many of us, found something else in the wilderness. She found a sense of pride, accomplishment, sheer strength and the feeling of being grounded in an enormous world. Most of all, she found a sense of self-understanding in contrast to her parents who were part of a refugee group. Persecuted during the Vietnam War, the Hmong came to America in the 1980’s with little grounding, little sense of self. They had no homeland. Yet, through her adventures into the wilderness, she found ways to relate to a way of life her parents had left behind.

Having now guided wilderness trips for a few summers at my YMCA camp, I’ve recognized how varied wilderness experiences can be for each and every kid I’ve worked with. But, in particular, the ethnic minorities on these trips have had experiences that can’t be categorized into the common American wilderness experience. Specifically, the

Hmong culture reveals deep-rooted traditions and values involving the wilderness and the mountains of Laos. Whether their experiences are shaped by a persistent search for identity in America, the utilization of natural resources, or the influence of shamanism, the Hmong have had a different experience with the wilderness in America. This thesis examines the Hmong in American society and how the wilderness provides a source of identity and a source of place. The experiences of the Hmong people illustrate both the maintenance of an ethnic identity and a form of segmented assimilation as they acculturate to American views of the wilderness as a place for self-discovery.

Hmong Background

The Hmong people are a Southeast Asian ethnic group originally from China who then migrated to Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. This ethnic group's historical relationship with the United States has been a tumultuous one. As Lee & Nadeau (2011) state, the Hmong have been engaged in an "eternal fight for freedom" (437). The United States first became involved with the Hmong prior to the start of the Vietnam War. The Geneva Conference of 1954 banned the US from entering Laos and Cambodia and therefore the CIA covertly entered these countries in order to exploit the people to fight against the communist forces in the area (Lee & Nadeau 2011). Specifically, the United States deeply involved the Hmong in their clandestine war as "more than 30,000 Hmong men and boys served as America's foot soldiers in Laos from 1961 to 1973" (Vang 2008:1).

At the end of the Vietnam War, the Hmong were persecuted by the remaining communist forces and were forced to flee Laos to refugee camps in Thailand by literally swimming across the Mekong River, which separates these two countries (Vang 2008).

The United States passed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act in 1975, but this piece of legislation originally only included refugees coming from Cambodia and Vietnam. Vang discusses how “after much advocacy by American supporters and Hmong community leaders, the act was extended in June 1976 to include refugees from Laos” (Vang 2008:10). The first Hmong refugees began coming to the US in 1976; the greatest influx of refugees came in 1980. There are supposedly 200,000 Hmong currently living in America although that estimate may under-represent the actual number. California, Minnesota and Wisconsin contain the largest Hmong populations in the U.S. Even with its harsh climate, Minnesota became a central location for Hmong in America due to the state’s “strong faith-based voluntary community,” which provided sponsors for new refugees coming to America (Vang 2008:11).

Since the first large migration in 1980, Hmong communities have been sustained by the Hmong’s family-oriented culture. Within the Hmong culture there are 12 specific clans that differentiate the various families: Chang, Hang, Heu, Lee, Lo, Mua, Pang, Thao, Vang, Vue, Xiong, and Yang (Lee & Tapp 2010:195). These clans are still present in America today, although some of the traditional cultural practices regarding clans have dissipated. Clans have been incredibly beneficial to the resituating of the Hmong in America since clan divisions can allow individual families to reunite in new areas. There is also an extreme emphasis placed on extended families in this culture—most family events that occur include all of an extended family, which may mean as many as 80-90 people (Vang 2008). Family remains a central tenant of this culture and current generations continue to be engaged in family activities and rituals. This culture continues

to practice patriarchy. However, this pattern is changing as many children who speak fluent English can take care of a family (Vang 2008).

Historically, the Hmong have practiced shamanism as their main religion, although missionaries in Laos converted a significant proportion of the Hmong population to Christianity during the early 20th century. Shamanism is a religion that includes a shaman who is able to communicate between multiple worlds—current life and the spiritual realm. Specifically, “shamans are traditional religious experts who have the ability to diagnose illness and cure suffering or other misfortunes such as drought or famine” (Lee & Tapp 2010:24). Shamans can be both male and female and are typically chosen by a “dab neeb” spirit, which speaks to them directly (Lee & Tapp 2010). While animal sacrifice is a common practice in shamanism, assimilation into American society has reduced the frequency of this practice.

The Hmong have continued to practice numerous rituals that reflect the foundation of their cultural values. For example, the Hmong New Year is a holiday still celebrated in America. Traditionally, the Hmong New Year was representative of the start of a new crop season (Vang 2008). Back in Laos, this holiday was a major event full of much excitement, where men and women could have a “time for courtship” and the finest traditional garments were worn in order to impress a member of the opposite sex (Vang 2008). Some of these traditions still continue today, such as courtship through a “ball-tossing game,” but many Hmong in America have altered this holiday by rejecting the traditional garments and opening the event up to the public. Another current issue with the Hmong New Year is the inclusion of vendors into the arenas where the Hmong New Year is held. These vendors represent an “economic element” which somewhat

detracts from the very essence of the Hmong New Year itself (Vang 2008). Although acculturation has impacted how the Hmong New Year is organized and run, Hmong New Year remains a major event within states with large Hmong populations.

Literature Review

Assimilation and Identity Formation

Assimilation is a sociological concept that has been used to explain the experience of some immigrants entering American society. Assimilation describes how a group or individual incorporates a host society's cultural norms into daily life through a process of acculturation. Specifically, Milton Gordon (1964) examined two major processes of assimilation—cultural assimilation (also known as acculturation) and structural assimilation. Gordon regards structural assimilation, or “large-scale entrance into cliques, clubs, and institutions of host society, on a primary group level,” as the major factor in total assimilation because “all of the other types of assimilation will naturally follow” after structural assimilation has occurred (Gordon 1964:71,81). Gordon's writings on assimilation are referred to as classical assimilation and helped to explain the situation of immigrants in America at the beginning of the 20th century.

Yet scholars who have studied patterns of incorporation and adjustment among subsequent and specifically recent immigrants assert that degrees and types of assimilation vary across groups. For example, Alba and Nee (2003) emphasize that acceptance from the host society of some of the cultural attributes of an immigrant group influence a group's opportunities and experiences. Alba and Nee also note the varying lengths of the process of assimilation for different groups. Other research has included

the idea of a “bumpy” course of assimilation, rather than the “straight-line” course that Gordon originally posited (Gans 1992). The multicultural perspective suggests that cultural definers of a group interact with those of “the host society to reshape and reinvent themselves” (Zhou 1997: 981).

A key aspect of all assimilation theories is the importance of capital in an immigrant group’s successes or failures. Human capital, or “formal education or skills acquired through organized instruction,” enhances one’s capacity to start a business, choose a place of residence, etc (Fernandez-Kelly & Schauflyer 1994:669). Social capital refers to the social networks and relationships of which individuals are a part (Bourdieu 1983). Social capital is similar to economic capital in that one can invest in strategies in order to “establish or reproduce social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term” (Bourdieu 1983: 103). Levels of social capital greatly influence the degree of assimilation, particularly for second-generation immigrants who are either adapting to cultural norms of a host society or retaining their own ethnic identifiers.

In recent decades, scholars have elaborated on straight-line theories of assimilation to account for the experiences of increasingly diverse groups. Portes and Zhou’s (1993) theory of segmented assimilation builds upon classical assimilation by suggesting multiple outcomes and retention of ethnic identifiers, along with the possibility of different rates of assimilation. This theory posits three outcomes of assimilation: successful assimilation with upward mobility and acculturation; “economic integration into middle-class America” while preserving some cultural values and ethnic identifiers; or downward mobility into a lower socioeconomic class (Zhou 1997: 984). Segmented assimilation also focuses on the interplay between individual (intrinsic)

factors and “contextual” (extrinsic) factors, rather than separating them as the classical assimilation model does (Zhou 1997: 984).

Zhou and Xiong (2005) examine the process of segmented assimilation for Asian immigrants in America. Asian immigrants are typically generalized into one overarching category of “Asian-American” and stereotyped as a “model minority” that easily assimilates into American society and achieves upward mobility. Zhou and Xiong (2005) attempt to disprove these generalizations and stereotypes since “Asians in America came from more than 20 national origins, each with its own distinct languages, religions, cultural heritages, human capital resources, and modes of incorporation into the host society” (1147). Their research and conclusions also support the theory of segmented assimilation; their findings reveal varied patterns of assimilation between and within Asian American immigrant groups. For Asian Americans, assimilation doesn’t simply happen in a “straight-line” fashion—“Assimilation outcomes are diverse, but not random; into what segment a group is likely to assimilate depends on the interplay between individual, family, community and societal factors, which are directly or indirectly linked to unique contexts of exit and reception” (Zhou & Xiong 2005:1149). The contexts of exiting the former country (such as persecution, war, etc) and the host country partly explain for differing outcomes for immigrant groups with similar levels of human capital (Vermeulen 2010). For example, Rumbaut (1996) explains how there is a “higher incidence of father absence” for Hmong in America due to “the death of the father prior to the family’s arrival in the United States, a reflection of their extraordinarily harsh contexts of exit” (144). Due to this situation, we might expect the Hmong to have more difficulty with adjustment than groups for whom fathers are more likely to be present.

Another element of segmented assimilation is selective acculturation. Portes and Rivas (2011) define selective acculturation as a process where, “Their children can learn the language and culture of the host society while preserving their home country language, values and customs—simultaneously gaining a solid foothold in the host society and maintaining a bond with their parents’ culture” (225). Rather than being fully acculturated to the host society, second-generation immigrants can maintain certain ethnic identifiers in combination with host country identifiers to maintain a stable socioeconomic status. Portes and Rivas (2011) found that in the process of selective acculturation, cultural capital is maintained and embedded into a successful process of assimilation. If cultural capital is lost through what can be described as “dissonant acculturation,” or a process which causes children “to reject the parental culture and national identity,” then “whatever resources are embodied in that culture effectively dissipate” (Portes & Rivas 2011:229,240).

Within the process of assimilation, identity formation for a refugee population in the United States can be an incredibly difficult process. David Haines (1989) details three major contexts that must be recognized in order to understand ways in which refugees assimilate: the state of the host country’s economy; “the presence of other recent newcomers”; and the status of the refugee program set up in the host country (Haines 1989:12). Jeremy Hein (1994) discusses the double-headed issue that Hmong refugees face—of being a “minority versus majority” and a “newcomer versus native.” Since the first-generation of Hmong immigrants were foreign born, the influx of refugees to the U.S. illustrates what Hein refers to as “the social constructionist perspective of ethnicity” (Hein 1994:281). Hein concludes that groups such as the Hmong have to decide whether

or not they “attribute inequality to their status as newcomers in a host society or to their status as a minority in a racial and ethnic hierarchy” (Hein 1994:281). If immigrants attribute inequality to their status as newcomers, the inequality will diminish as time passes and they are accepted into society. On the other hand, identification as minorities will reinforce inequality until institutional changes in society occur.

Wilderness in America

The concept of wilderness in the United States can be directly related to specific cultural movements throughout American history. Prior to the colonization of the United States, notions of the wilderness mainly came from the Bible. Biblical figures faced many trials and tribulations as they wandered the wilderness in order to pay retributions to God; the wilderness was seen as “a place where one might purge and cleanse the soul to be fit in the sight of God” (Hendee & Dawson 2002: 5). A view of the wilderness as a place to be feared prevailed until the birth of Romanticism in the 19th century, at which point the wilderness became a “sublime” destination, where people expected a religious, awe-evoking reaction (Cronon 1995).

As Americans sought to forge a distinctive character, they turned to the country’s geographic attributes as one means to distinguish themselves from the Europeans. In the absence of a longstanding civilization, Americans emphasized the endless wilderness of the continent stretching from ocean to ocean. Roderick Nash (2001) details how Americans began to realize during the 19th century that “it was in the *wildness* of its nature that their country was unmatched” (Nash 2001: 69). Early Americans believed that this “equivalent of a wild continent” would also provide them with “a distinct moral

advantage over Europe” (Nash 2001: 69). Identification with this conception of wilderness contributed to American nationalism and pride. This domination of land led to an exaltation of what it meant to be American, emphasizing strength and pride in the American nationalism.

From the beginning of the 19th century to the start of the 20th century, the “national myth of the frontier” prevailed. The wilderness became an arena of “national renewal, the quintessential location for experiencing what it meant to be American” (Cronon 1995: 4). The frontier of the American West helped to accentuate the uniquely American ideals separating America from Europe. The myth of the frontier also distinguished industrial, urban areas from the wilderness areas and initiated the movement towards wilderness preservation and outdoor recreation. The American frontier reinforced the idea that humans could dominate land (as well as other humans, such as Native Americans).

The 19th century in the American West fostered the mentality that going back to wild nature had a “restorative element and a revisiting of authenticity” (Cronon 2009). The concept of a national park began with the discovery of Yosemite in California in the mid-19th century. After recognizing the sheer beauty of this area and the need to protect such a land, Lincoln signed a bill in 1864, which gave the State of California control of 60 square miles of land that would be “preserved for public use, resort and recreation” (PBS 2009). It was in Yosemite that John Muir mused over the importance of wilderness in America and began his life-long battle to preserve its wild lands. After Yosemite became a California State Park, President Grant signed a bill creating Yellowstone National Park on March 1, 1872, the first national park in the world (PBS 2009). The

creation of this national park furthered the movement towards preserving wild lands rather than dominating or exploiting them.

Numerous wilderness proponents during the beginning of the 20th century were influential in the preservation process of wilderness in America. John Muir's writings remained influential through the turn of the 20th century. Muir saw a sense of spirituality through the interconnectedness of nature and humankind. As he so eloquently stated, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe" (Muir 1911). This interconnectedness illustrated the importance of preserving land in order to take care of humankind. Aldo Leopold was another prominent wilderness proponent that helped to imagine the ways to utilize the incredible land in America. He wrote: "For three centuries that environment has determined the character of our development" and we must not "exterminate this thing that made us American" (Leopold 1925:78). Wilderness advocates such as Muir and Leopold greatly swayed the American public by relating wilderness preservation to the American character.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 demonstrated the supreme importance of wilderness in America. This piece of legislation defined wilderness as, "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (Hendee & Dawson 2002:5). Wallace Stegner's famous letter to the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission in 1960 describes the "wilderness idea" as being an "intangible and spiritual resource" that is at the very core of the American identity. Stegner's evocative letter helped to spur the continuation of the movement towards modern efforts of wilderness

preservation and conservation. For Stegner and many others at this time, preserving the wilderness was more than simply keeping the beautiful wild lands of America wild—it was also a means of protecting the American consciousness.

The ideas of writers, scholars and politicians have contributed to a core set of values pertaining to wilderness protection. In general, these values include: recreation; scenery; science; education; conservation/preservation; history; quality of life; and economy/commercialism (www.wilderness.net). Schuster, Tarrant and Watson (2005) also discuss social value within the concept of wilderness in America. Updating values from surveys until 1985, the modernized list of “personal benefits” is comprised of: development; therapy/mental health; physical health; self-sufficiency, independence; social identity; education; spiritual; and aesthetics/creativity (132). Although these lists do not cover all potential wilderness values in America, they capture how many Americans feel about wilderness through survey data.

Though survey data confirm a set of common values, constant changes to the U.S. demographic makeup make it difficult to define who a typical wilderness user is. Generally, the stereotypical wilderness user is defined as “young, athletic, wealthy, leisured and urban” (Hendee & Dawson 2002:399). However, this stereotype does not necessarily encapsulate all kinds of wilderness users across the U.S. Hendee & Dawson (2002) expand upon the stereotype in the following definition:

In general, wilderness users, compared to the general population, tend to be young but with all age groups represented, predominantly male but with increasing numbers of women, from urban areas but largely near the wilderness area visited, are above average in income but rarely wealthy, well educated, and in professional or technical occupations or students.

Natural Resource Use and Ethnic Groups

While there is a large amount of research on the role of wilderness in societies and on the behaviors and cultures of ethnic groups, the intersection of these two bodies of literature is only beginning to expand. In the United States, there are various Federal Agencies that keep track of ethnicity usage of natural resources in America. These Federal Agencies include: USDA Forest Service, USDI National Park Service, USDI Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Gramman 1996). Overall, due to structural constraints and historical contexts, ethnic minorities tend to be less involved with activities that include natural resource use. The majority of current research illustrates that “a higher percentage of white Americans tend to participate in wildland recreation activities than do African Americans,” whereas Hispanics and Asian Americans tend to interact in ways more similar to that of white Americans (Gramman 1996:36).

In terms of historical contexts, America has discriminated against minority ethnic groups in terms of use and accessibility of natural resources. For example, much of the American legislation passed during the 1800’s deeply constrained Native Americans by limiting the amount of land to which they could have access. These limitations caused severe social consequences, such as “changes in subsistence patterns and household security” for the Native American populations and significantly altered their livelihoods (Schelhas 2002:730). Another ethnic group that has struggled with natural resource accessibility in the U.S. are the Hispanics in the Southwest. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 compelled many Hispanics to cede their land to become part of national forests; the loss remains a divisive issue today (Schelhas 2002). African Americans in

the U.S. have endured similar discriminations due to social and other repercussions of slavery. Many white landlords refused to sell land to former slaves thus disenfranchising former slaves and preventing African Americans from establishing a strong connection with American land (Schelhas 2002). In terms of Asian Americans, “Alien Land Laws” were passed in California at the beginning of the 20th century, which “prohibited non-citizens from owning land” (Schelhas 2002:734). The internment camps of the Japanese during World War II also contributed to the loss of land among some Asian immigrant groups.

These forms of historical discrimination help to explain the lower rates of minority groups utilizing the wilderness in America today. Other hypotheses include the “marginality” hypothesis and the “ethnicity” hypothesis (Gramann 1996). The marginality hypothesis stipulates that racial minorities, particularly African Americans, will under participate in outdoor activities due to “limited economic resources” from historical acts of discrimination (Gramann 1996: x). The ethnicity hypothesis posits that certain minority groups will under participate due to “culturally based differences between ethnic groups in values, system norms, and leisure socialization patterns” (Gramann 1996: x). Unlike the marginality hypothesis, this hypothesis focuses more on the cultural factors that differentiate these minority groups from the mainstream American society. In reality, socioeconomic and cultural factors seem to both be at work in explaining why racial and ethnic minorities are less likely to participate in outdoor activities and less likely to utilize natural resources.

In a recent study, minority groups were surveyed regarding their perceptions and utilizations of the wilderness through what the authors constructed as “wilderness value

indicators” (Johnson, Bowker, Bergstrom & Cordell 2004). These authors stipulated that the social construction of wilderness in America would impact how ethnic minorities, both immigrants and native-born US residents, valued the concept of wilderness.

Wilderness values are defined as “the relative worth, utility, or importance attributed to the use or existence of wilderness preserves” (Johnson et al. 2004:614). The wilderness value indicators that were created for this study included: current use value, future use value, environmental quality value, scientific/medical value, option value, intra/intergenerational bequest value, existence value and intrinsic value (Johnson et al. 2004). With ten questions designed to explore these value options, individuals were surveyed and results were analyzed. The results of this study demonstrated that there were lower numbers of ethnic minority group members utilizing the wilderness.

However, lower participation rates could not be explained by the idea of wilderness value as a stereotypically or exclusively white American ideal. One unique outcome of this study that is important for the research at hand is that “Asians were the only ethnic minority to be more likely than Whites to respond positively to items relating to existence and intrinsic values.” The authors speculated that this might be due to the fact that “Asian Americans may hold more holistic, non-human-centered views of wild nature” (Johnson et al. 2004).

Although there is not much research that explains this relationship, there is some literature regarding Hmong refugees in America and their interactions with the American wilderness. Among the few authors who have written about this topic, Bengston and Schermann (2008) researched the situation of outdoor recreation among Hmong-Americans specifically in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Through five focus groups, these

authors investigated numerous aspects of natural resource use by Hmong individuals. When asked about public lands, participants discussed how they liked “places that were relaxing and peaceful, allowed them to be close to nature, were close to home, reminded them of Laos, and where they receive less harassment and discrimination” (Bengston & Schermann 2008:881).

These focus groups also talked about how improvements could be made in terms of public land use for minority groups such as the Hmong. Suggestions included cultural training for park managers, hiring more minority workers, training classes for hunting and fishing, and signs with rules that would be “made explicit to avoid misunderstandings and conflict” (Bengston & Schermann 2008:885). Since the last closing of a refugee camp in 2004 in Thailand, almost 15,000 more Hmong refugees have come to the U.S. The Hmong interviewed through these focus groups proposed ways to ease this transition for new immigrants, such as “special and intensive training for new refugees” and “pairing up new refugees with experienced and trained mentors” (Bengston & Schermann 2008:886).

The focus groups concluded that Hmong utilization of public lands tends to give a sense of “maintaining Hmong culture” since it connects “with aspects of their time-honored way of life and the beliefs and values associated with it” (Bengston & Schermann 2008: 887). The presence of racism and discrimination towards the Hmong is structurally based in some things such as signage without imagery, but some racism is also due to confusion over public land laws, including misunderstandings about boundaries of public versus private land. In order to decrease discrimination towards the Hmong in Minnesota and Wisconsin, these authors posit that increased options for

education regarding public land use could be incredibly beneficial. Bengston and Schermann (2008) see the Hmong issues with public land to be “part of a larger pattern of intercultural and interracial tension experienced by many other minority groups” (888).

Methods

The majority of this research was conducted in the Twin Cities of Minnesota due to its large population of Hmong immigrants. The nonrandom, convenience sample of interviewees were selected through personal connections with a cultural consultant. The primary method was face-to-face interviews except for a few interviews via Skype. Numerous participants were students at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities Campus and therefore a few interviews took place on the campus itself. The participants were between 18-60 years old, but the majority were between the ages of 20-30. Of the nine interviewees total, six were men and three women. All of the participants had completed an undergraduate education and some of the participants were planning on continuing their education to a graduate degree level. Participants were either currently students or employed in some fashion. The most popular outdoor recreation activities cited by the participants included canoeing, day hiking, overnight camping, fishing and biking. Participants visited wilderness areas in varying amounts, from everyday to five times a year.

The information regarding these individuals is to remain confidential in order to protect the identities of the participants. The interview questions pertained to identity and culture within the United States and wilderness experiences in America (interview schedule is included in Appendix A). The interviews were recorded on an automatic

recorder and all participants were required to fill out consent forms in order to demonstrate their understanding of their participation in this research. Open coding occurred after all of the interviews had been transcribed. The main codes used in this investigation were: former lives; utilization of natural resources mentality; religion; wilderness values/attitudes; and identity.

There are many limitations to this research. One of the primary limitations is that the sample size is much too small. One cannot generalize to the Hmong population in America as a whole. Another limitation is the fact that the only Hmong interviewed for this research were from the state of Minnesota. Even though Minnesota has one of the largest Hmong populations in the United States, it would have been beneficial to interview participants from other major Hmong populous states, such as California and Wisconsin. Only three women were interviewed in this research, which acts as a limitation in understanding how different genders interact with the wilderness. In the future, using a larger sample size with an equal gender ratio over a longer period of time could expand upon this research. Sustaining relationships with participants over an extended period of time could result in more data analysis in terms of identity formation and personal reactions to the wilderness.

Analysis

Ethnic Identifiers through Aspects of Former Lives

As recent immigrants to the U.S., the Hmong continue to embrace their heritage and former lives in the countries of Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The majority of the participants are considered second-generation immigrants since they were born in

America. A few of the participants were first-generation immigrants who migrated to the United States after the Vietnam War. Some of the second-generation immigrants considered themselves to be of the second-generation even if they were born in Southeast Asia. Portes and Rivas (2011) refer to this sense of identity as the “1.5 generation”—“Children born abroad, but brought to the host society at an early age, making them sociologically closer to the second generation” (220).

Although these distinctions are based on American categorizations, the participants tended to embrace the labels of their generational differences. Pa described her generational category by stating, “I guess I’m considered second generation into America cause my parents immigrated from Laos in 1989 and so I was the first born in the U.S.” Bao expressed a similar attitude regarding her family: “I think my family’s much more Hmong than they are American (...) they were born in Laos or Thailand, and they’ve had to come over after the war and so I guess the things they do tend to be more Hmong than American.” Peter described his parents as being “experts in the culture,” something that he is not able to fully achieve as a second-generation Hmong immigrant in America. As a 1.5-generation immigrant, Teng identifies more with the second-generation way of thinking. Teng stated, “I was not born here, but when I came here I was just a little baby so I know nothing about, came from Laos, I know nothing about Laos.” The differences between generational identities demonstrate varying levels of cultural knowledge and ties, which greatly influence the ways in which different generations assimilate. Having a former life in another country gives first-generation immigrants a different approach and perspective on American assimilation, especially in terms of wilderness use and recreation.

Numerous participants discussed the connection between their own former lives in Southeast Asia or their parents' former lives in relation to the wilderness and wilderness experiences. Described as a "mountain people," the Hmong have retained a meaningful connection to the natural world since their migration to the U.S. Peter described how "the Hmong traditional culture has a deep connection with nature." Shong shared similar feelings by talking about the roots of the Hmong culture—"Well because we come from the wilderness right, we come from mountains and up, up hills of Laos and Thailand and so we still uphold our appreciation for nature and wilderness in a way." Xeng saw his connection to nature as "just part of my heritage, and it is part of the experience that I have of growing up from the old country and transitioning to the new here." As an agriculturally based culture in Southeast Asia, the Hmong struggled with transitioning to urban areas where nature was not as easily accessible (Vang 2008). Participating in wilderness activities is a way to maintain a connection with former lives in Southeast Asia, which were entrenched in the wilderness for survival and livelihood.

Second-generation participants recognized this connection with the former lives of their parents and relatives. Peter explained how his father and uncle had different views of wilderness activities compared to his perspective of wilderness activities as a form of family time, and he speculated that this was because "part of them really wants to go back and connect with what they've done, connect with their childhood." Elizabeth also brought up this idea when she mentioned that, "especially for the older people, it kind of brings back memories of how they lived in the homeland." For first-generation Hmong immigrants in America, wilderness activities do resemble certain activities that they participated in when they lived in Laos and Thailand. Fishing, hunting and

gathering plants for medicinal uses were all traditional aspects of Hmong lifestyles in Southeast Asia and therefore, continuing these practices can “bring back memories” for immigrants who were born and raised in Southeast Asia.

The idea that wilderness activities can help connect second-generation immigrants with the former lives of their first-generation parents is something that was also discussed in multiple interviews. Having been born and raised in America, many second-generation immigrants are aware of cultural norms and practices, but do not have a full understanding of what life in Southeast Asia was like. Pa discussed how she first persuaded her parents to allow her to participate on a canoeing trip in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of Northern Minnesota. She convinced them by reminding them “that this would be a good experience of like just living without electricities, like how they used to live in Laos and like how they survived without all these electricity, all these cars or phones.” Pa described her feelings regarding her parents’ former lives in Laos and how wilderness opportunities could be a potential way to preserve the Hmong culture in America. Pa said,

It gave me an eye-opener of how my parents like survived like without electricity, how they used a bathroom in nature. And like just carrying that pack or a canoe and portaging, that made me like have that sense of feeling of how they like umm travelled miles and miles just carrying water to back to their home and stuff. And so I feel like it would be great, a great opportunity for further generations to experience and feel how their parents or grandparents have umm suffered or like experienced.

Pa’s recognition of some of the similarities between aspects of wilderness activities and the way her parents lived in Laos provided her with a unique wilderness experience. Bao expressed a similar mentality regarding her first wilderness experiences in America, specifically her canoeing trips in the Boundary Waters of Northern Minnesota. Even though her parents were hesitant to allow her to go on her first canoeing trip, she

acknowledged the ways in which participation in wilderness trips could help future Hmong generations comprehend what their parents experienced in Laos and Thailand.

Bao stated,

But a lot of parents they embrace that, because we were originally mountain people, we thrive in that environment back home and back in history. And so they think that if you go and embrace the wilderness, you're kind of embracing the past and your own, your parents and their history. And so they want their kids to experience that and be like, 'This is what we had to live through, and this is very similar to our lives before we had to come to America.'

Bao and Pa's perspectives demonstrate the desire of parents or first-generation immigrants to maintain the Hmong culture in American society. Even if adaptations are made to their culture, maintaining a core part of their culture, the deep connection to nature, could be sustained through second-generation wilderness participation.

At the same time, over-arching generalizations cannot be made in terms of first-generation Hmong immigrants and their wilderness interactions. Due to the nature of their role during the Vietnam War, some Hmong immigrants may feel that the wilderness holds negative reminders for them. During the Vietnam War, the thousands of Hmong soldiers that participated in guerilla warfare were fighting throughout the mountainous countryside of Laos (Vang 2008). In a compelling memoir about her migration to the United States, Kao Kalia Yang describes the soldiers that her family comes in contact with after the U.S. forces have left Laos. Yang says, "They wore camouflaged uniforms; some of them had tree branches tied onto their helmets. They were like little pieces of wilderness with guns" (Yang 2008:23). For some Hmong immigrants who were forced to flee into the mountains of Laos, the wilderness has negative connotations. Bao described how her brother had different experiences with the wilderness in comparison to her own very positive perceptions. She noted, "Whereas like if you talk to my oldest

brother you know like his experience from the war and stuff it's kind of like, 'I want to stay away from the wilderness and the jungle, it's not my thing, it's you know, I've seen enough in my lifetime.'" Having had negative experiences with the wilderness during the Vietnam War, Bao's brother conveys a pessimistic outlook of the wilderness in America. Although the wilderness does bring back memories of a former life for Bao's brother, it brings back memories of a former life that he may not want to remember or relive. This viewpoint demonstrates how different attitudes may be regarding the wilderness depending on its connection to memories of former lives in Southeast Asia.

Utilization of Natural Resources Mentality

A common theme throughout the interviews was the utilization of natural resources, particularly through the activities of hunting and fishing. In order to understand the ways in which the Hmong partake in these activities, a brief context of hunting and fishing in American must be discussed. Jan E. Dizard (2003) describes how the shift towards agrarian lifestyles in places like America diminished hunting populations. Specifically, "the greater predictability of crops made hunting increasingly marginal, from a utilitarian point of view, and meant that only those with time on their hands could hunt" (Dizard 2003:41). As described in the literature review, it is difficult to define an American hunter in much detail, but Dizard's analysis reveals that hunting in modern society is more leisure and recreation based, rather than subsistence and consumption based. Through her research, Dizard recognizes that hunters see hunting as a form of recreation and sport, like "a contest in which the hunter matched wits with his

quarry” (Dizard 2003:98). These elements of hunting help to establish the normative American image of hunting.

In contrast, when describing their connection to nature, almost every individual interviewed discussed how the Hmong were originally a “wilderness people,” or even more specifically, a “mountain people.” As Zha stated, “The Hmong are born and like and love natural resources, to use the natural resource as a resource.” Even though they have assimilated in many ways to the American mainstream, the Hmong continue to interact with the wilderness in a way that includes an element of consciously utilizing natural resources, rather than enjoying recreation.

This concept of utilizing the wilderness as a natural resource influences how the Hmong view activities they participate in such as fishing and hunting. Instead of hunting or fishing for food, many American sportsmen participate in these activities with a goal in mind—to shoot the biggest buck or catch the largest fish. There is a range of attitudes in terms of how American hunters and fishers partake in their sports, but creation of policies such as “catch-and-release” in fishing illustrate less of a utilization of what is caught or hunted and more of the mainstream acceptance of hunting or fishing for recreation. The framing of these activities as sport includes a competitive element that reflects a historical shift away from a subsistence economy. In terms of specific policies in America, Peter described how the Hmong don’t necessarily believe in these concepts. Peter stated,

Two examples: fishing to catch-and-release and just trying to catch the biggest fish; only shooting/hunting trophy bucks. For the Hmong, if it’s a legal sized fish, we keep it, bring it home, and eat it. Hunting deer, if we don’t see a buck, we would still hunt does and harvest the meat to eat.

Rather than partaking in American cultural practices such as catch-and-release, modern Hmong hunters and fisherman are more focused on utilizing what is caught or hunted instead of its size and value.

Although most Hmong have access to food and can meet their basic needs, their perspective on activities such as hunting differs from the typical American hunter. For example, Teng elaborated upon the notion that hunting was for more than just trophy:

The Hmong culture, the difference I see is to collect is to use. So if they were to collect something or if they were to fish, they eat it or they use it, it's not for trophy, it's not for display, it's for edible, for use, to do something with it, even for medicines or you know edible, it's to use. So for example, if you were to go out and hunt, as long as you got the deer or the turkey or the squirrel, you eat it. You don't aim for, well it's good to aim for the biggest one, the bigger is better, but as long as you catch it, you eat it.

The Hmong understand the value of shooting a larger animal, but they do so for utilitarian purposes or as Teng put it, "to do something with it." Shong elaborated upon this idea when he stated, "Yes, we actually do consume what we kill or fish or whatever. It's really all about consumption. It's not so much for like the thrill aspect. We actually do eat the deer." The "thrill" associated with competitive hunting is not as prevalent for the Hmong as it is for mainstream Americans today. Although some Americans continue to eat their kill for consumption, this attitude is more prominent in cultures such as the Hmong. Consuming what is hunted or fished is one means of continuing the cultural practices and meanings of their Southeast Asian ancestors.

This mentality is also demonstrated through the wilderness activities of the first generation Hmong women. Many older Hmong women gather wild plants, particularly for medicinal uses. Teng articulated, "The Hmong love fishing, hunting, gathering plants, not just for food, but also for medication purpose too." Traditionally, the Hmong have a "documented tendency to use herbal medicines and other cultural kinds of

medicines” (Hendricks, Downing & Deinard 1986:336). Using herbal medications is a part of shamanism and is thus deeply rooted in the Hmong culture. Bengston and Schermann (2008) detail that in their research of Hmong interactions with natural resources, “the main purpose of gathering was for subsistence consumption rather than commercial sale, but families often combined gathering work with research” (879). Many first-generation Hmong women are continuing to gather plants in order to maintain the use of herbal medicines and “subsistence consumption,” which act as ethnic identifiers in America. Although some Americans use homeopathic methods for medicinal purposes, Western medicine is a much more prominent form.

The belief that people should utilize natural resources is deeply embedded in the Hmong culture. Xeng affirmed that, “We come from a culture where we hunt for food and not for recreation.” The majority of second-generation Hmong interviewees saw utilization of natural resources as a primary reason for wilderness involvement. However, societal pressures to assimilate are affecting changes in beliefs and perspectives. The concept that wilderness activities were moving towards being recreationally based for future generations was brought up in numerous interviews. Xeng described attitudes as “moving towards sports now when before it was more hunting for food.” Zha concurred by stating, “Right now there’s not much interest to shoot a doe, more interest to shoot a trophy buck.” The persistence of this belief among some people indicates a difference between immigrants who are assimilating into American society and those who seek to or are able to maintain aspects of their culture. As second-generation immigrants have little understanding as to what life was like in Laos, seeing wilderness activities as utilizing natural resources may be a way for them to make sense

of the former lives of their parents and relatives. In terms of first-generation immigrants, consideration of their children's futures through assimilation may have impacted the ways in which they participate in wilderness activities. Bengston and Schermann (2008) stated that "the act of fishing helps to ease the shock of adjusting to a new culture; it serves as a link to the past and helps to maintain identity" (879). Being immersed in a new culture may have caused first-generation Hmong immigrants to view their reasons behind wilderness activities in a different light compared to the attitudes of second-generation immigrants who are hoping to embrace their culture and the former lives of their parents.

Religion and Spiritual Connections to Nature

Every participant interviewed discussed the role of religion as part of the Hmong culture. The majority of the participants identified shamanism as their religion, but a few participants identified as Christians. Two of the participants discussed how their ancestors were converted to Christianity after Catholic missionaries began interacting with the Hmong in Southeast Asia. As Pao explained, "There's all these religions that are sort of tied back to that ethnicity." Religion played a major role in the ways in which the participants described their cultural interactions and specifically, how different religions played different roles in wilderness interactions.

The majority of the Hmong, including those in America, continue to practice shamanism. Shamanism is based upon the belief that there is a connection between two worlds, the spiritual and the present. A shaman is needed to communicate between these two worlds and act as "a spiritual healer and religious leader" (Vang 2008:53).

Numerous participants discussed how they had shamans within their families. Bao explicitly stated that her “dad was a shaman.” Shong talked about helping his grandfather who is a shaman with certain rituals and Peter discussed how his two uncles who were shamans played “a very important role in the community, religiously, spiritually and culturally.” Having a family member as a shaman illustrates the prominence of this religion in America. Even for the second-generation participants who recognized their inability to fully commit to shamanism, having a family member as a shaman allowed them to continue to be involved even if they were still coming to terms with their personal beliefs. Assimilation has impacted shamanism in some ways, such as shortening of the lengths of rituals or altering the process of sacrifices, but the essence of the religion still remains.

Although there were only a few participants who identified with Christianity, Pa recognized that “a big population of Hmong are Christians.” Even with an increasing number of Hmong Christians, Christian participants expressed a disconnect from the traditional Hmong norms. For example, participants identifying as Christians conveyed a different attitude toward Hmong rituals. For the Christian participants, the term “ritual” is mainly associated with the Hmong religion of shamanism, and therefore, Christian participants believed they were less active in ritual participation. When asked about Hmong rituals in America, Elizabeth articulated that her family “actually converted to Christianity so we don’t do the Hmong practices.” Xeng described a similar attitude. He said, “As far as ritual go, I’m a third generation Christian so I don’t perform any animism ritual.” The association of rituals with shamanism appears to impact the Hmong identity formation within America. As Hmong Christians identify with the religious practices of

Christianity, they seem to feel a disengagement from the Hmong “rituals” associated with shamanism. This distinction illustrates the a tension between shamanism and Christianity. As shamans are a major part of the Hmong community, Hmong who identify with Christianity are in a sense disregarding and devaluing the power and importance of a shaman and his/her abilities. This separation can cause a major tension to rise between these two religious groups. But, at the same time, greater acceptance of differing religious ideologies is becoming prominent in the Hmong culture. Pa used the example of how her parents accepted her sister’s conversion to Christianity through marriage. The recognition of religious freedom within the Hmong culture is something that is continuing to develop and will continue to influence the culture here in America.

The most prominent connection between religion and the wilderness is the role of the spiritual world in nature. Although people may classify shamanism as animism, it is in fact a different religion due to the necessary presence of a shaman in communicating with the spiritual world. When asked about myths or folklore regarding the wilderness, all of the participants discussed the role of spirits in the woods, even the ones who self-identified as Christians. Pa asserted that the Hmong who practice shamanism “believe in like spirits and evil spirits especially and a lot of evil spirits are in the woods and they believe that in the woods, there are a lot of things that could happen to you.” This fear of spirits in the woods was exemplified through the concept of superstitions, which almost all of the participants discussed. A major fear in shamanism is the loss of a spirit, which would then entail the use of a shaman to help redirect the spirit back into one’s body. Bao detailed ways in which one could lose their spirit in the wilderness, such as singing in the woods, responding to someone’s calling your name and walking with your hands

behind your back. These superstitions could cause you “to lose your spirit and when you come back you’re not going to be who you are.” Spiritual loss can cause a loss of identity; this is a major fear for many Hmong, even those who don’t currently practice shamanism.

Multiple interviewees described the desire to achieve a harmonious relationship with the wilderness. Peter emphasized the importance of respecting the wilderness and taking care of nature. Peter explained, “Don’t go tearing up the wilderness because you might disturb a spirit and you might hurt them and if you hurt them, they might hurt you.” Peter related this idea to Daoism:

And I think those, that belief has a lot of beliefs that go back to umm parallel to Daoist beliefs of animism, of spiritual things, of karma. And so it goes back, it’s really, really deep with that. There are you know aspects of reincarnation, sometimes people are reincarnated, you know they say be careful of what you kill as well because you never know that a small little insect or bug might have been a great person in their past life.

These elements of shamanism, or even more broadly, the Hmong culture, greatly impact the ways in which individuals interact with the wilderness. With ideas of karma and reincarnation, Hmong-Americans like Peter are more likely to respect the nature they’re a part of. This deep level of respect is demonstrated through Bao’s personification of the wilderness as a person. After discussing superstitions and the wilderness, Bao stated:

I mean for me it affected umm how I reacted to, or responded to the wilderness, be more respectful on my behalf cause I feared that my soul was gonna get taken. But it was just like more meaningful cause like I saw the wilderness as like a person or as a, it’s an identity really. And so it wasn’t just the wilderness, it was like, it was like an individual that I was embracing or going to.

Seeing the wilderness as an individual or recognizing the importance of karma and reincarnation may provide Hmong-Americans with a different attitude when interacting with the wilderness. Rather than being motivated by a conservation viewpoint, positive

wilderness interactions for Hmong-American individuals could be attributed to their religion and cultural beliefs regarding spirits in nature.

Another intriguing element regarding religion is the distinction between Southeast Asian Buddhist beliefs and those of other religions. Zha referenced different perspectives on fishing:

And I learned something 15 years ago about Cambodia they say yes we love to eat fish, but we are Buddhists, we cannot kill a live fish. So we cannot fish, we cannot kill fish. And some Vietnamese, some Buddhists, they don't want kids to touch a fishing pole because the mom that teach them that they should not be killing fish, should not be going fishing. But some they don't care. They are Buddhists, but they still go fish, eat fish, hunt, kill deer, stuff like that.

The traditional Buddhist belief states that, "Violence had to be avoided in all its forms, from the killing of humans and animals to the intellectual coercion of those who think otherwise" (Conze 1980:11). Since Buddhists believe in avoiding violence to animals, they are unable to participate in the hunting and fishing that is a prominent part of many Southeastern Asian cultures. This unique distinction may help to account for the large amount of Hmong who participate in outdoor activities including hunting and fishing in comparison to other Southeast Asian immigrant groups in America. For the Hmong who practice shamanism, the practice of hunting and fishing illustrates a harmonious relationship with the earth. Bao affirmed this relationship since in her experience, one must "kind of honor the ground that you are on, so if you're gonna take something be sure to be like tell them that you're gonna take it and that you're not gonna do any harm." These varying religious perspectives demonstrate the differences in how individuals interact with the wilderness.

Connection to American Values and Attitudes of Wilderness

Ever since the establishment of wilderness as a part of the American identity, authors have been writing and speaking about the emotions that the wilderness evokes. As Walt Whitman eloquently expressed, “Now I see the secret of making the best person: it is to grow in the open air and to eat and sleep with the earth.” Many of the attitudes expressed by participants related to Whitman’s mentality. The ways in which participants described feelings and emotions during wilderness adventures demonstrate a connection to some of the American philosophies of the importance of wilderness in society today.

One attitude about the wilderness was the sense of working hard to accomplish something in a way that can only be achieved outside of the city. As Sigurd Olson, a famous advocate for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Northern Minnesota, described in his essay titled, “Why Wilderness?,” some people need the wilderness to provide them with a real challenge in life. Olson eloquently articulates this view by stating, “They need the sense of actual struggle and accomplishment, where the odds are real and where they know that they are no longer playing make-believe” (Olson 1938). This same sense of an “actual struggle” providing real odds and accomplishment was discussed with numerous participants. Pa detailed her feelings after her first canoe trip in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. By acknowledging the difficulty of the work she was doing, she was able to see another aspect of her wilderness adventure. Pa remembers the initial feeling of working through a portage (where a canoe is carried on one’s shoulders on a trail which connects two lakes):

Yeah, to be able to portage that canoe and just having that responsibility to be able to finish the portage and see another body of water on the other side... in between, it was difficult. But then once you saw that other side of the water it was like the feeling of

accomplishment and relief was so great that it made you feel like the sense of promise, yeah, accomplishment and stuff.

For Pa, working through a portage provided her with an actual struggle that she would not be able to find in the cities. From that struggle, she recognized feelings of responsibility and accomplishment within herself. The concept of work on a canoe trip is something that differs greatly from the concept of work in an urban area. The “struggle feeling” she feels during a portage adds to the sense of achievement: “One feeling I get is the struggle feeling where I’m portaging or I’m sweating like down my back and I’m dehydrated and just that struggle feeling that I... that only at that point I would feel, when I don’t get that feeling, like in the cities.” As a second-generation immigrant, feelings of accomplishment are extremely important in self-development and formation. Pa is able to explore these feelings of accomplishments through the struggles present on wilderness activities.

Pao also brought up the idea of responsibility in terms of his personal wilderness experiences. After reminiscing about his first experience on a camping trip with his family, he described what he considers to be his “best experience”:

Now my best experience, I personally went out by myself with a group of friends and so when you’re out there then everything becomes your responsibility and so cooking becomes your responsibility, setting up the tent, making sure everybody is safe... so all of that becomes, that’s the real experience when I’m out there and everything’s my responsibility or my group’s responsibility.

The element of responsibility that is present on a wilderness trip, whether it’s a day hike or a weeklong camping trip, is something that is available for any participant of any age. As a college student who still relies on his parents, Pao is able to explore responsibilities on a camping trip with friends where he has the power to make decisions and therefore the responsibility to keep everyone safe. Exercising responsibility on a camping trip can

help an individual develop their character as they battle what Olson refers to as “real odds.”

Another element of wilderness enjoyment for the interviewees was the aspect of family time that was a part of many of their wilderness experiences. The majority of the interviewees were first introduced to the wilderness by their parents. Whether or not their parents continue to participate in wilderness activities to this day, many of the participants fondly recollect their first outdoor experiences with their parents.

Remembering a trip with his “whole family,” Shong describes how his extended family first introduced him to the camping experience at an early age: “Some of my aunts and uncles who came to the U.S. before us, they’re like, ‘Oh, let’s go camping, you guys will like it.’” Having family members who were already settled into American society allowed Shong’s immediate family, more recent immigrants at the time, to experience a camping trip in Wisconsin quite easily. However, not all initial introductions to the wilderness by family members were positive. Teng talked about how his family of 50 went camping for the first time at a state park in Minnesota. Unfortunately, all of the group campsites were full and his family was forced to camp in the picnic area. Teng remembers “a lot of racism and discrimination and we do get a lot of bias and other stuff like that as we camp on the picnic area.” Even though his family was trying to enjoy a camping trip at a local state park, racism continued to pervade their experience.

Aside from initial introductions to the wilderness by family members, numerous participants saw extended family time as a reason why they have continued with outdoor activities. Having grown up hunting and fishing with his father and uncles, Peter, as a busy college student, sees these outdoor recreations as providing ways to interact with his

family. Peter stated, “And I think now, I see it more as family time because I don’t get to see my family very often.” Elizabeth also saw camping trips as an opportunity for family bonding, along with creating a unique environment for family interactions. When asked why she enjoyed outdoor activities in nature, Elizabeth responded with,

Family connection is very important to me and you know just being able to hang out with your family that’s outside of you know going to someone’s house, it’s really fun (...) I feel like in the wilderness it just kind of gives it a different feel to the family gatherings as compared to at someone’s house.

As proponents of wilderness have written for years, the wilderness can also be an incredible place for relaxation and finding a sense of peace. John Muir beautifully explained this state of mind when he said, “Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.” Being in a beautiful location can cause inner reflection as one ponders the simplistic way of life out in the wilderness. Many of the participants discussed how relaxing the wilderness was. Zha stated, “Oh you know the nature is a kind of happiness. When you go and enjoy the nature you relax, you enjoy it, and when you go hunt or fish you can focus on the sport that you forget about your mortgage.” Escaping city life for a brief period of time can allow Zha to forget about daily stressors and simply relax. Pao even described nature as “a stress reliever” and his “relaxation point.” Away from technology and stresses of modern life, one can truly relax in the wilderness and even find a sense of peace. Teng stated, “It doesn’t matter where it is, a waterfall right in the middle of a rock crop or in the woods somewhere, it’s just a sense of peacefulness to it.” Relaxation and a sense of peace are appealing aspects of the outdoor experience.

Identity Formation and Identification within Society

As discussed in the literature review, there are numerous elements that a refugee population must process in order to formulate an identity in American society. From “minority versus majority” to “newcomer versus native,” members of a refugee population such as the Hmong must make their way through these various forms of identification. Varied identities are accepted and common for a population such as the Hmong. Rumbaut (1996) details how “ethnic self-awareness is either heightened or blurred, depending on the *dissonance or consonance of the social contexts* that are basic to identity formation” (124). Differing social contexts can create differing forms of self-awareness as immigrants of the second-generation attempt to formulate an identity.

Interviewees described different ways of relating to American society as a cultural identity. Almost every participant discussed involvement in Hmong specific groups, such as Hmong Minnesota Students Association, Hmong Men’s Circle or Shades of Yellow (SOY). These groups, many of which are associated with the University of Minnesota, are outlets for cultural and ethnic expression for the majority of the participants. In terms of personal identification, Pao discussed how self-identifying explicitly as Hmong can increase awareness. Pao explained that, “because not a lot of people know about Hmong, they’re not aware that there’s an ethnicity such as Hmong. So when you put that out and indicate you are Hmong, people are more aware.” On the other hand, Pa, who is a student at a college on the East Coast where there is a tiny Hmong population, had a different experience with identifying as Hmong. Rather than constantly explaining what Hmong is, Pa says she’s found herself “up to this point identifying myself as Asian American, or Asian American or Pacific Islander American.

And so it's harder to identify strictly to Hmong when it's not known to all." Instead of using identification for awareness, Pa appears to have little choice but to resort to an identity that doesn't require an explanation. Consequently, she denies or ignores her Hmong identity in public interactions. These varying responses demonstrate how location and personal beliefs can impact how one chooses to ethnically identify.

The concept of balancing two cultures came up in multiple interviews. Many second-generation immigrants found themselves in between two worlds and two cultures. Rather than being distinctly American or distinctly Hmong, these participants are a part of both cultures and are working to incorporate both into their lives. Surprisingly, many of the participants responded positively to this notion of being in between two cultures, or as Elizabeth put it, "one step in the American world and one step in the Hmong world."

Pao had a similar attitude to Elizabeth's as he declared,

It's like when you have two, you have a balance between the two. I know some people who are like, 'Well you can't have two at the same time, you have to pick one or the other,' but it's like that's not always the case. You can pick and choose, you can always have two, it's a balance, I love it.

Pao's general excitement about balancing two cultures demonstrates a different perspective of the second-generation of Hmong immigrants in America today.

Explaining the value of achieving balance between two separate cultures, Teng stated,

It is very, very important that I continue with the traditions and also partake in the Western culture and tradition also because you know to maintain both you can't just leave one take one and leave another. It has to be equal otherwise you won't have an equal share of teaching, you don't understand one in front of the other so it is actually very important that you have both in equal balance.

Finding a way to modernize some aspects of the traditional Hmong culture while maintaining ethnic identifiers is a difficult task, yet many participants seem excited by it.

Shong described his coming to terms with the Hmong culture when he realized that it was “a beautiful culture” and he wanted to bring it into his more modern American ways.

Nevertheless, differing perspectives on identity in America emerged as well among second-generation Hmong immigrants. Specifically, Bao referred to herself as the “unconventional” and “liberal” one among her friends and family. She explained:

I think I’m always seen myself as a Hmong American just because I was born in America, the first in my family. And so I’ve always had that American identity. Umm and because Hmong is part of my family, you kind of, you kind of take it with a grain of salt and kind of accept that as you grow up, who you are. And so I’ve just gone as Hmong American throughout my whole life. And I’ve never really been American or a Hmong because it’s kind of like you can’t be either, you have to be both because you represent that.

Even though she is a part of both cultures, she discussed her involvement in “non-Hmong things.” When asked how being a part of American society has affected her relationship to her culture, she boldly stated, “I think it’s definitely made me more skeptical.” Rather than being excited about the prospect of intertwining two separate cultures, Bao expressed a more cynical view of her relationship to her Hmong heritage. Assimilating into American society has caused Bao to question the very basis of her Hmong identity as she acculturates to more American ways.

When relating to the wilderness, some of the participants discussed the idea of identity discovery while in the wilderness. Roderick Nash (2001) details the incorporation of a self-discovery mentality into the American concept of wilderness: “But a wilderness challenge—even one as simple as carrying a pack and following a trail—required self-sufficiency and could generate self-confidence” (266). This mentality of self-understanding through wilderness experience is applicable for Hmong immigrants as well. When asked why she enjoyed participating in wilderness activities, Bao simply responded, “I loved that feeling of going back and having a sense of tranquility and a

sense of knowing that when I come back here, this is who I am, this is who I know I am.” Stripping away the pressures from daily city life, Bao was able to come to a different understanding of who she is as a person in the peaceful environment of the wilderness. Pa had a similar outlook in terms of her experiences. After describing the numerous challenges she had to overcome on her canoe trips as a teenager, she stated, “It’s the sensation of feeling all these, having all these different feelings, umm that I enjoy and it’s a way of like getting to know myself and what I’m capable of feeling.” By putting herself in an unfamiliar environment with new challenges, Pa was able to explore the depths of her identity.

Teng also recognized this aspect of self-discovery in the wilderness when asked about why he enjoyed spending time in nature. Teng responded with, “The thing about nature is you’re out there and you find your own self, you create your own self, you basically get your own imagination, you see things as is without any bias.” Outside of the structured institutions of society, Teng finds himself creating who he wants to be. Without the bias of certain groups and people influencing who he thinks he should be, Teng finds tranquility in the ability to formulate an identity that is true to who he is.

Conclusion

I think we just have to engage our community that we are a culture that connects to the earth. We lost that somehow I don’t know in a transition because we certainly don’t have a country of our own, there’s no country in the world they call Hmong land. And so we are known to be a good agricultural steward, if you read Chinese history, Chinese acknowledged us and praised us for being a good agricultural and environmental steward. But as we transitioned to Laos and were affected by the Vietnam War and carry weapons, machine guns and all that, you know we become warriors and then we migrate here. And then that transition kind of interrupt our agricultural, environmental, outdoor practice to some extent.

As Xeng eloquently stated, the Hmong people have undergone constant transitions throughout their history. All of these transitions—the migration from China to Laos, the U.S. involvement during the Vietnam War, the refugee camps of Thailand, and finally, the relocation to the United States—have interrupted the very core of the cultural identity of the Hmong people. As a refugee group that has finally established themselves within American society, defining an identity specific to the Hmong culture has been a continuous challenge.

In terms of assimilation and the wilderness, the Hmong have distinctly interacted with the wilderness in ways that differ from the American normative. Differences can even be seen within the Hmong population in America, such as differences in wilderness interactions for first and second-generation immigrants. For example, interacting with the wilderness brings back memories of former lives in Laos for many first-generation Hmong immigrants. Participating in specific outdoor activities help first-generation immigrants to stay connected to the roots of their culture. Also, the connection of shamanism and the spiritual world demonstrates a deeper, more specific religious connection to nature than is present in the American perception. Even the way in which Hmong immigrants utilize natural resources differs from the American normative, since many Hmong choose to stray from American practices such as “catch-and-release” in fishing and eat and hunt for wildlife regardless of their size or value.

However, even with these distinctive differences, the Hmong do interact with the wilderness in ways that are similar to the American perception of wilderness. During the interviews, many of the participants responded with positive values and attitudes of wilderness in America, similar to the ways in which Americans have responded to their

social construction of wilderness. The positivity of these reactions, feelings of accomplishment, relaxation and peace, and source of individuality are explicitly connected to the American development of wilderness. The expression of these values illustrates a level of acculturation to the American way of interacting with wilderness. The fact that many of these feelings of self-identification through wilderness interactions came from second-generation Hmong immigrants shows how there are conflicting views and differing levels of assimilation for this refugee group in America. Separate reference groups for varying generations may also affect the ways in which Hmong immigrants relate to the American ideas of wilderness as a place for identity formation and creation of self.

As discussed in the literature review, one of the unique characteristics of the American perception of wilderness is its connection to the essence of the American identity. Regarding Hmong immigrants in America, there is another element of identity formation, which has connections to the American identity and national consciousness. The process of segmented assimilation is evident in the ways in which Hmong immigrants describe their identities and identity formation processes in the wilderness. First-generation immigrants form identities through the wilderness by reconnecting with their culture and their former lives in Laos. This process of identity formation demonstrates an element of segmented assimilation as first-generation immigrants retain ethnic identifiers, such as the deep connection to nature and utilization of natural resources. Second-generation immigrants, who are constantly balancing two cultures, form identities in the wilderness by reconnecting with ethnic identifiers while simultaneously acculturating to the American mentality of self-discovery in the

wilderness. As Douglas Wood, a nature writer from Minnesota expressed, “And maybe it is only on the trail to nowhere-in-particular you find the most important thing of all. Yourself.” Second-generation Hmong immigrants are incorporating American mentalities into their self-discovery while reconnecting with the roots of their Hmong culture.

Understanding the process of identity formation for a refugee population is critical in recognizing how a host country can assist in smoother transitions in order to facilitate identity recognition and understanding. In terms of the wilderness, it is important to continue to study the ways in which individuals interact with nature in America. The American concept of wilderness has been studied and understood within historical contexts, but not much research has been done on how new immigrants interact with and incorporate this mentality. Specifically in terms of assimilation, little research has been conducted discussing immigrants and the wilderness. How and why immigrants choose to interact with wilderness in America will be incredibly important for future preservation and conservation efforts of wilderness areas.

This thesis also recognizes a group in America that is not widely known. In order to understand the process of assimilation for immigrants in America, it is necessary to stop generalizing groups, such as Asian Americans, and focus on specific ethnic groups with their own individual cultures. Spreading awareness about the Hmong culture and their involvement in American society is an important element of understanding specific group assimilation into a host country’s society, rather than a generalized group’s perspective.

Works Cited

- Alba, Richard D. and Victor Nee. 2003. *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and the New Immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- “Assimilation Models, Old and New: Explaining a Long-Term Process.” 2006. Susan K. Brown and Frank D. Bean, University of California, Irvine. Retrieved February 21, 2012. <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/print.cfm?ID=442>.
- Bengston, David N., Michele Schermann, Maikia Moua, and Tou Thai Lee. 2008. “Listening to Neglected Voices: Hmong and Public Lands in Minnesota and Wisconsin.” *Society & Natural Resources* 21(10):876-890.
- Bengston, David N. and Michele Schermann. 2008. “Hmong Americans: Issues and Strategies Related to Outdoor Recreation.” Pp. 19-24 in *Diversity and the Recreation Profession: Organizational Perspectives*. Revised edition. Pennsylvania: Venture Publishing Inc.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1983. “The Forms of Capital.” Pp. 96-111 in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Burns, Ken. 2009. “The National Parks: America’s Best Idea.” Public Broadcasting Service.
- Conze, Edward. 1980. *A Short History of Buddhism*. London, Great Britain: George Allen & Unwin.
- Cronon, William. 1995. “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” Pp. 69-90 in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Cronon, William. 2009. Speaker in “The National Parks: America’s Best Idea.” Public Broadcasting Service.
- Cordell, H. Ken, John C. Bergstrom and J. M. Bowker. 2005. *The Multiple Values of Wilderness*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing Inc.
- Deinard, Amos S. 1986. “Introduction: Health Care Issues” in *The Hmong in Transition*. Staten Island, NY: The Center for Migration Studies of New York, Inc.
- Dizard, Jan E. 2003. *Mortal Stakes: Hunters and Hunting in Contemporary America*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

- Gans, Herbert J. 1992. "Comment: Ethnic Invention and Acculturation: A Bumpy-Line Approach." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 11(1):42-52.
- Gramann, James H. 1996. "Ethnicity, Race, and Outdoor Recreation: A Review of Trends, Policy and Research." US Army Corps of Engineers, Natural Resources Research Program.
- Fernandez-Kelly, M. Patricia and Richard Schaufli. 1994. "Immigrant Children in a Restructured U.S. Economy." *International Migration Review* 28(4):662-689.
- Haines, David W. 1989. *Refugees as Immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese in America*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Hein, Jeremy. 1994. "From Migrant to Minority: Hmong Refugees and the Social Construction of Identity in the United States." *Sociological Inquiry* 64(3):281-306.
- Hendee, John C. and Chad P. Dawson. 2002. *Wilderness Management: Stewardship and Protection of Resources and Values*. 3rd ed. Golden, CO: International Wilderness Leadership (WILD) Foundation & Fulcrum Publishing.
- "How Wilderness Benefits You." 2012. The University of Montana. Retrieved March 4th, 2012. (<http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=values>)
- Lee, Jonathan H. X. and Kathleen M. Nadeau, Eds. 2011. *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Lee, Gary Yia and Nicholas Tapp. 2010. *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, ABC-CLIO, LLC.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1925. "Wilderness as a Form of Land Use." Pp. 75-84 in *The Great New Wilderness Debate: An Expansive Collection of Writings Defining Wilderness from John Muir to Gary Snyder*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.
- Johnson, Cassandra Y., J. M. Bowker, John C. Bergstrom, and H. Ken Cordell. 2004. "Wilderness Values in America: Does Immigrant Status or Ethnicity Matter?" *Society and Natural Resources* 17:611-628.
- Milton, Gordon. 1964. *Assimilation in American Life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Muir, John. 1911. *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Nash, Roderick Frazier. 2001. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 4th ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

- Olson, Sigurd. 1938. "Why Wilderness?"
- Portes, Alejandro and Alejandro Rivas. 2011. "The Adaptation of Migrant Children." *Future of Children* 21(1):219-246.
- Rumbaut, Rubén G. 1996. "The Crucible Within: Ethnic Identity, Self-Esteem and Segmented Assimilation Among Children of Immigrants." Pp.119-170 in *The New Second Generation*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Schelhas, John. 2002. "Race, Ethnicity, and Natural Resources in the United States: A Review." *Natural Resources Journal* 42(4):723-763.
- Schuster, Rudy M., Michael Tarrant, and Alan Watson. 2005. "The Social Value of Wilderness." Pp. 114-142 in *Multiple Values of Wilderness*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.
- Vang, Chia Youyee. 2008. *Hmong in Minnesota*. Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press.
- Vermeulen, Hans. 2010. "Segmented Assimilation and Cross-National Comparative Research on the Integration of Immigrants and their Children." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33(7):1214-1230.
- Wood, Douglas. 1993. *Paddle Whispers*. Duluth, MN: Pfeifer-Hamilton Publishers.
- "Wallace Stegner's Wilderness Letter." 1960. The Wilderness Society. Retrieved January 10, 2012.
(<http://wilderness.org/content/wilderness-letter>)
- Yang, Kao Kalia. 2008. *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*. Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press.
- Zhou, Min. 1997. "Segmented Assimilation: Issues, Controversies, and Recent Research on the New Second Generation." *International Migration Review* 31(4):975-1008.
- Zhou, Min and Yang Sao Xiong. 2005. "The Multifaceted American Experiences of the Children of Asian Immigrants: Lessons for Segmented Assimilation." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28(6):1119-11152.

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Introduction: As you may know, as a senior sociology major I am writing a research paper this year. I decided to choose the topic of how people think about the wilderness because I am interested in the wilderness myself. In addition, in recent years I have participated in wilderness-related activities and I want to know more about how other people relate to the wilderness. Years ago, I discovered that many Hmong people partake of the wilderness and I would like to talk about what it means to you.

- 1) Tell me a bit about yourself. What does a normal day look like for you?
 - a. Describe your family and friends.
 - b. Are there specific organizations/associations that you are a part of?
- 2) How would you describe your identity within American society? For example, do you identify as an American, an Asian American, a Hmong, a Hmong American, etc.
 - a. Can you tell me the reasons you identify as such?
- 3) Are there ways you try to maintain your Hmong identity within America?
 - a. Are there specific traditions/cultural practices that you regularly partake in?
 - b. In what ways do you express your cultural heritage on a daily basis? How do your parents express their cultural heritage on a daily basis?
 - c. Have these traditions changed over time, say from the time you were a small child to now? Do you partake in some less regularly than others?
- 4) How did you learn about these traditions?
 - a. Would you say that your family or parents have passed them along to you?
 - b. How important is it to them that you practice certain traditions or hold certain values?
- 5) Has being a part of American society influenced your relationship to your culture? If so, how?
 - a. Do you ever feel that it is difficult to maintain your culture and adopt the values or behaviors of American society? If so, can you give me an example of how the cultures are different?

I now want to turn our conversation specifically to the wilderness.

- 6) In terms of the wilderness, please describe your first wilderness experience.
 - a. Who was it with?
 - b. How were you introduced to it?
 - c. When and where did it take place?
 - d. Did you enjoy it?
 - e. What were your initial reactions of this experience?
- 7) Why do you enjoy spending time in nature/participating in wilderness activities?
 - a. How does being in nature make you feel?
 - b. Are there aspects of wilderness activities you don't like? Please describe them.
- 8) Have you heard about efforts to preserve the wilderness in the United States? If so, what kinds of acts of preservation do you support?

- 9) How do you feel about future generations interacting with the wilderness? Do you think it is important to teach future generations to appreciate the wilderness?
 - a. How do you feel about future Hmong generations interacting with the wilderness? Is this something you value and hope to see happen?
- 10) How do your family and friends feel about the wilderness?
- 11) Are there any myths/folklore involving the wilderness that are a part of the Hmong culture?
 - a. Were you introduced to these as a child?
 - b. Were there varying depictions of the wilderness in different stories?
- 12) How does the Hmong culture interact with the wilderness in ways that differ from other cultures?
 - a. Why do you think people have different perspectives on the wilderness?