Please, Bears Don't Talk! The Smokey Bear Performance Rules[1]

Joe Hermer
Carleton University

If you go down to the woods today
You're in For a Big Surprise

If you go down to the woods today
You'd Better go in Disguise
- The Teddy Bear Pic-Nic Song

I

In an age of widespread environmental destruction and toxification, how is the 'official' version of nature constructed within the boundaries of North American recreational parks? To ask this question is also to struggle with a remarkable paradox: that the very parks where we try to 'get back to nature,' the very places where we look to experience a permissive freedom from the regimen of urban life, are some of the most harshly regulated, intensely ordered spaces in the public sphere, a paradox expressed in the apparent oxymoron of a *regulated wilderness*. For it seems increasingly true that the regulated wilderness of North American parks is representative of the very oppressive features of urban life from which people, quite ironically, look to parks as an escape.

In this brief paper, I would like to specifically examine one well known agent of the moral order of park governance, Smokey Bear. However, let me first provide a thumbnail sketch of the larger research effort from which I have drawn Smokey as such a vivid example.

As a contribution to the sociology of governance,[2] my

research efforts examine how competing regulatory regimes work to constitute and police the moral order of the public sphere. A major branch of this project is an examination of the governance texts of major park jurisdictions in North America.

Park governance texts consist of park legislation, field and standing orders, officer training guidelines, public relations material, occurrence, injury and fatality statistics and descriptions. These governance texts constitute the political-juridical intent to govern park jurisdictions. In examining these texts, I am interested in the textual constructions that constitute the discursive intent of park institutions, and the possibilities *of ordering* that this intent generates.

Also, let me be clear about what I mean by *park*, a difficult little word to conceptualize. When I talk about a park, I am generally referring to an outdoor landscape open to the public for both day and night visitation (i.e. camping), in the charge of formal provincial or state government under a dual mandate of both preservation and recreation of natural and cultural resources.

I begin by providing a brief historical account of Smokey Bear, which I have drawn from Stephen Pyne's (1982) wonderful social history, *Fire In America*.

II

In July, 1942, United States Secretary of Agriculture Claude R. Rickard announced in a radio broadcast that

> the control and prevention of forest fires is a first line defense job on the home front...We cannot forget...that the British Royal Air Force found it worthwhile to start great fires in the forests of Germany. Every fire in our fields or forests this year is an enemy fire. (cited in Pyne, 1982:176)

While the connection between forest fire prevention and national defense had for some time become popular in the public mindset

with slogans such as "Careless Matches Aid the Axis" and "Your Match, Their Secret Weapon," this moral campaign lacked its own unique symbol (Pyne, 1982:176). In 1944 the Wartime Ad Council and The Co-Operative Forest Fire Prevention Campaign, with the help of an advertising consultant, came up with the idea of using a bear, after considering other animals, including squirrels and monkeys (Pyne, 1982:176). The artist contracted to create Smokey was instructed by forest service and war council bureaucrats that this bear should wear "a campaign hat," should have "an appealing expression" with "a knowledgable but quizzical look" and should not look like "the bear that symbolized Russia" (Pyne, 1982:176). The first poster of this uniformed bear was issued in 1945, named after a famous new york city fireman, "Smokey Joe" Martin (Pyne, 1982:176). However, it was in 1950 when a real bear became the ultimate referent for the poster: an abandoned bear cub, saved by a ranger from a forest fire, became "Little Smokey" and was delivered into legendhood to Washington National Zoo (Pyne, 1982:177). At the height of his popularity in the mid 1960s, Smokey was polled as being the most recognizable figure in American life, and the *Smokey Bear Act* was passed by congress to protect him from "commercial exploitation" (Pyne, 1982:177). Despite efforts at providing the famous caged bear with a mate named Goldie, Smokey left no offspring and died in zoo captivity in 1977 (Pyne, 1982:177). By then, Smokey had become one of the most popular exports of American consumer culture, where his persona was exported to Canada, Mexico and Turkey. Smokey was even introduced by missionaries to the jungle of the Belgian Congo, where children were reported by a Forest Service Publication to be "intensely interested in the bear that wore a hat and wondered if all animals in America wore hats" (Pyne, 1982:179-180).

III

What role does this American symbol of patriotism and moral fortitude currently play in the regulation of North American park

space? Every summer Smokey Bear costumes are dispatched in crates across North America to parks to be animated in "visitor service" and "nature interpretation" programs. And it is this contemporary presence of Smokey which I would like to turn our attention to by examining the most notable governance text "Guidelines For The Use of the Smokey Costume" (Ministry of Natural Resources [MNR], 1994) a list of rules that accompanied the Smokey Bear costume on his tour through Ontario Provincial Parks in the summer of 1994. These "Smokey Bear rules" which park staff are expected to follow when suited up in the Smokey costume, nicely illustrate the important distinction made by H.L.A. Hart between primary and secondary rules, between rules that order regulatory objects, and rules that regulate the agents of regulation (Hart, 1961).

The secondary "Smokey rules" have three main prescriptive themes: to regulate the character of the person wearing the costume; to order the performance that Smokey carries out; and to prescribe the role of an assistant present to maintain this performance.

The wearer of the Smokey costume, who should "be tall" (MNR, 1994:2) is expected to behave in a manner that does not soil the image of Smokey. The wearer is warned, apparently without irony, of "no alcohol or cigarettes during Smokey performances" (MNR, 1994:3). The rules go on to suggest that Smokey should "Be alive, [v]igorous, alert and remember, you are presenting one of the greatest of all symbols. You are a celebrity, a star. Act like one, don't destroy the image" (MNR, 1994:3).

The rules then move to prescribe how Smokey should perform as a forest fire prevention celebrity. Smokey's entrance should be in full costume—no half dressed bears are allowed—and is warned not to "appear before your cue" (MNR, 1994:2), a perfect reminder of the dramaturgical nature of Smokey's presentation. The wearer should "know the route you are going to take so Smokey looks alert, not lost," and he should move

about "carefully as not to upset children" (MNR, 1994:3). Smokey is urged not to "stand with your hands at your side" but rather "hold them up and move them about. [w]ave to people" (MNR, 1994:3). In a tone that suggests the wearer might somehow be losing his human sense, the rule writer suggests that "[a] handshake is a useful device for activity" (MNR, 1994:3).

With the character of the wearer secure, and his movements prescribed, the role of an assistant is emphasized. Smokey should always be accompanied by an assistant, one that will "let Smokey lead" and "keep crowds from him...they tend to maul his suit." In a regulated wilderness it is the friendly bear who is in danger of being mauled (MNR, 1994:2). Most importantly, "an assistant should do all the talking. It is best to keep Smokey silent. This helps prevent him from saying anything "dumb" and preserves his image as a bear. Bears don't talk" (MNR, 1994:2).

IV

This anthropomorphic performance constructs Smokey with an unassailable moral character, which is made even more admirable in the figure of a civilized bear. He is the perfect authority to communicate the risk of both human and non-human worlds: he is rendered inhuman by his inability to speak; rendered unwild by his adoption of the niceties of human interaction. Smokey is an epitome of moderation, he is punctual, polite, nicely groomed, good with children: a picture of self control and personal responsibility. In fact, one could hardly think of a more offensive figure than the anti-image of these secondary rules: a rude, slothful, badly dressed bear, drinking and smoking, stumbling lost without human assistance, scaring children with his attempt at human speech.

Smokey's character, which is used to invoke the dangers of carelessness, promotes a central characteristic of park order: the promotion of self-regulation. Self-regulation utilizes a shifting public/private distinction that makes possible "action at a distance" where regulatory agents can make "the absent present"

(Latour, 1986).[3] The promotion of self governance is vividly illustrated in Smokey's slogan, which dates back to 1947, "Remember, ONLY YOU can prevent forest fires," which was often accompanied by a picture of Smokey standing against a shovel, pointing Uncle Sam like at the implied reader. Smokey's slogan is strikingly similar to another warning central to the regulation of leisure, "Only You can stop drinking and driving." And like discourses of alcohol regulation, fire itself is removed from embodying the object of regulation: Smokey is not so much concerned with actually regulating fire as he is in ordering the behaviour of people, just as impaired driving crusaders focus on the evil character of the drunk driver.[4]

This environment of self-regulation, communicated through the stoic character of Smokey, promotes a climate of surveillance where individuals are encouraged to self-police themselves as well as the 'strangers' around them. This risk based surveillance is most vividly expressed in the presence of neighbourhood watch type programs which are popular in many parks. Often, "park watch" programs utilize their own animal mascots, some of whom look like they could have been rejects from the original smokey campaign; for example, Maryland state parks utilizes "McGruff The Crime Dog" to encourage visitors to participate in "park watch" and "take a more active role in protecting personal property and preserving the park" (undated, Maryland Forest, Park and Wildlife Service). The dual emphasis here that invokes both environmental preservation and personal protection is especially notable in park jurisdictions: the binding together of personal and environmental risk, where one works both to secure the self and save the environment, provides for a powerful moral emphasis.

V

While Smokey was one of the most successful symbols to have emerged out of the propaganda rooms of World War Two, he can be seen today as a more subtle agent of another moral campaign

of industrial North America: the ordering and manufacturing of the experience of nature and wilderness. The character of Smokey, animated through public appearances ordered by secondary rules, promotes a surveillance based environment of risk that creates a self-regulating landscape of moral purity. Smokey performances are a vivid contribution to the order of the regulated wilderness that represents nature as a perfectly ordered, sanitized landscape where risk is constantly evoked through moralizing discourses of self-regulation. Indeed, as a civilized "celebrity" of the wilderness, Smokey stands as a disturbing image of a degraded, emasculated 'dancing bear' of late industrial society, ordered to perform for park tourists, subjected to an image of nature congruent with the values of consumerism and practises of environmental exploitation.

Notes

1. As adapted from a presentation at the Graduate Student Work In Progress Seminar, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, October 26, 1995.

2. For an introduction to the sociology of governance see Hunt and Wickham (1994).

3. The governance technology of "action at a distance" is exemplified in the use of "Official Graffiti" (Hermer and Hunt, 1996) such as the "No Loitering" or "Stay on The Path" signs. Such explicit inscriptions evoke absent experts and officials and construct regulatory targets as self-regulating objects who are at risk.

4. The emphasis on forest fire prevention that Smokey promotes in park settings is strongly overstated. Recreationalists cause relatively few fires, and the ones they do ignite burn relatively little area—lightening strikes are the main culprit of forest fires. For example, between 1978 and 1987, in all provinces, recreationalists (both park and non-park) were reported to have caused 17% of all fires, which accounted for 2% of the total areas burned (see Higgins and Ramsey (1991:9)).

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