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Data meet a network energizer: a portrait of Joseph T. O’Leary

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Introduction

As a former student, I was entrusted with the honour to write an academic portrait of Joseph T. O’Leary. Apprehension is an understatement. This is someone who truly inspired and steadfastly guided me to the wonderland of scholarly research, and someone who literally walked me down the aisle on my wedding day. As I started my assignment, however, I soon realized that I am merely the keepsake for this project. Joe has made such a difference for so many people in their lives that their strokes need to be carefully woven into the portrayal. The process of data collection led to many conversations with Joe’s former students, colleagues and peers, friends, and collaborators. The perspectives and episodic evidences of this portrait come from a number of individuals including: Dr Aukrene Alzuai (CICtourGUNE Cooperative Research Center in Tourism, Spain), Dr Hyungsuk Choo (Bowling Green University, USA), Dr John Crompton (Texas A&M University, USA), Dr Amy Gregg (Ball State University, USA), Dr Tzung-Cheng Huan (National Chiayi University, Taiwan), Dr Soo Cheong Jang (Purdue University, USA), Dr Dale Hall (Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, USA), Dr Gyehee Lee (Kyung Hee University, South Korea), Dr Xiang Li (University of South Carolina, US), Dr Alastair Morrison (Belle Tourism International Consulting, China), Dr Nandini Nadkarni (Schifflet & Associates, Ltd., USA), Dr Michael A. Schuett (Texas A&M University, USA), and Dr Philip Pearce (James Cook University, Australia).

Purdue University, Texas A&M University, and Colorado State University, three land grant universities, have served as platforms where Joe has left his legacy as a faculty member, an administrator, and a leader. He joined the faculty of Forestry and Natural Resources in the School of Agriculture at Purdue in 1974. After 26 years at Purdue, where he went from being junior faculty to a well-respected full professor, he became the head of the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management at Texas A&M University in 2001. In 2007, he was hired as Dean of the Warner College of Natural Resources at Colorado State University, where he is currently a professor. Joe’s academic career parallels the emergence and maturation of tourism as an academic discipline in the USA. He comes to tourism from Forestry and Natural Resources, representing one of the pioneering generations of scholars bursting onto the tourism landscape from various related academic fields. He has made his mark by infusing the perspectives of resource-based creation and leisure into the conceptual foundation of tourism. He has contributed to the foundation building of destination experience planning and management.

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I am not sure whether his resume sheds the best light on who he is, although his profile most definitely resembles that of a decorated scholar in our field. His close to 200 publications have appeared in recreation and park, tourism, and natural resource journals. He is the author and co-author of over 300 technical reports and other monographs, and has made over 120 presentations to academic, governmental agencies and other audiences. He was elected to the Academy of Leisure Sciences, the American Academy of Park and Recreation Administration, and the Phi Beta Delta Honor Society for International Scholars. He was elected as Chair of the Marco Polo Society of the International Statistical Association. He was recipient of the Renewable Natural Resources Foundation Outstanding Achievement Award (2002), and recipient of the Franklin D. and Theodore Roosevelt Excellence in Recreation and Park Research Award (2005). In 2011, he was named as Eminent International Scholar in South Korea. He was prominently involved in the Leisure Research Symposium and served eight years as an associate editor of Journal of Leisure Research and in a similar capacity for Leisure Sciences: and he is Past President of the Academy of Leisure Sciences and a co-editor of the Journal of Tourism Sciences.

Road to tourism

Similar to many pioneering scholars in the tourism field, Joe and tourism found each other seemingly by serendipity. Joe was born in 1946 and raised in New York City until he was 16. In his autobiographic account of how he embraced tourism, Joe credited his very early exposure to tourism to two grandparents who worked as managers in hotels in New York City, his parents’ willingness to give him freedom to explore places, and his own natural affinity for outdoor recreation. ‘I found myself visiting museums, libraries, art galleries, and almost every other major setting in the city, because they were there and I was curious’ (O’Leary, 2011). It was those nurtured moments and his natural affinity that planted the seed for his later interest in recreation and tourism. Joe was the first in his family to attend college and obtain a doctoral degree. He went to the University of New Brunswick in Canada as an international student. He chose forestry as his major largely due to his passion for the outdoors. His senior’s thesis project on community recreation resources played a role in propelling his later pursuit in human dimensions of forestry. Joe earned a Bachelor of Science in Forestry from the University of New Brunswick (1969).

Joe was increasingly intrigued by the sociological aspect of forestry when he spent two years at Yale University for his Master’s degree. Joe attributed this inclination to the influence of his advisor Dr. William Burch and the academic environment where there were abundant cross-pollinations of ideas as a result of interactions with scholars from multiple disciplines. Joe found himself being introduced extensively to sociological theories and interdisciplinary learning that he had not expected. He obtained a Master’s degree in Resource Management in the School of Forestry & Environmental Studies from Yale (1971). In 1974, Joe obtained his Ph.D. in Forest Recreation in the College of Forest Resources from the University of Washington. He applauded Dr Donald Field, his Ph.D. advisor at the University of Washington, for further strengthening his aspiration to contribute to the social aspect of forestry recreation. It was Dr Field who provided Joe with opportunities to be involved in research projects related to the National Park Service. His dissertation was in fact a sociological study of a community’s transition as a result of the then newly created North Cascades National Park.

Joe’s initial encounter with tourism not surprisingly comes from work with the U.S. National Park Service (NPS). The NPS had been an early financial supporter of the
international travel survey conducted by the Office of Travel and Tourism Industries (OTTI) located in the International Trade Administration of the US Department of Commerce. In the late 1970s, the NPS was interested in knowing more about international travellers to the national parks in the USA. Joe was keen on assisting the agency in that endeavour. He made a trip to Washington, D. C., in 1979 in an attempt to gain access to the U.S. International Travel Survey. That effort, albeit unsuccessful at the time, signalled the beginning of his relentless pursuit of government agency databases.

Joe’s formal entry to tourism comes from a sabbatical year spent at Clemson University in 1985. It was during that period he first met Scott Meis from Parks Canada, an assistant director of the Parks Canada Social Science Research Program at the time. That meeting led to several decades of a research partnership between the two, and preceded his research collaborations with Tourism Canada, Parks Canada, the U.S. National Park Service, and the U.S. Office of Travel and Tourism Industries. In some sense, it was interestingly fitting that being an American; Joe started his academic training in Canada as an international student, then he was introduced officially to tourism research through a Canadian researcher, and started his very first engagement with tourism research through a Canadian travel data program. Coming to terms with tourism and establishing a decorated line of scholarship in tourism, all make perfect sense. Tourism appears to be such a natural platform for Joe – it threads who he is and what his passions are together seamlessly. His very first publication in a tourism journal was a canonical analysis of international tourism demand in *Annals of Tourism Research* Uysal and O’Leary (1986).

**Sociological dimensions of outdoor recreation and tourism**

Tracing Joe’s intellectual footprints through his half a century of scholarly activities in recreation and tourism rivals walking through a mesmerizing mosaic path, so colourful and yet so neatly etched together. Joe’s early scholarly investigations address the sociological dimensions of outdoor recreation. Outdoor recreation constitutes an integral, and in some cases, core component of leisure tourism. His later research interest in social influence on destination activity participation was then a natural extension of his roots in outdoor recreation. Joe’s research pioneers and exemplifies a sociological approach towards leisure activity participation in both hometown and tourism settings.

The 1970s marked a productive period for the young scholar Joe. His research focused on social influences on outdoor leisure involvement. He published his first scientific article in the *Journal of Leisure Research* (JLR) in 1973. It became a classic. It was the first paper that empirically verified that the social group was the most powerful predictor of activity participation. Four decades later that may appear to be obvious, but in 1973, the JLR was in its fifth year of publication and the science base of this field was scant. Following that study, Joe established a research program that centred on a consistent advocacy for a social systems model towards natural resource-based outdoor recreation planning and management. For the following 10 years or so, his research was closely aligned with this notion.

In the 1980s, Joe continued his examination of the role of social demographic variables in influencing participation. He started a series of studies related to methodological considerations of systematically incorporating influential social variables in federal, state and local agency surveys, especially in the context of non-consumptive natural resource use such as leisure-oriented use. One point of emphasis was the deliberation of how to
optimally garner knowledge of public use pattern to inform public policy formation regarding non-consumptive use of natural resources. The starting and ending points of his research were usually linked to the advocacy for science-based management of outdoor recreation resources to better meet public needs. One such example was his investigation O’Leary and Dottavio (1981) of recreational activity clusters. It represents one of the pioneering attempts to empirically cluster natural resource recreational activities based on user patterns.

It was during this period that Joe’s expertise was sought by the President’s Commission for Americans Outdoors (PCAO). In 1985, President Reagan established a Presidential Commission on Outdoor Recreation Resources Review to revisit the issue with the goal to lay out land and water resource policy directions for the future. Joe was tasked to provide a series of literature synthesis, analysis, and reports to the Commission. His work provided technical foundation, information, and interpretation of America’s outdoor recreation participation, and contributed to the policy formation to improve, enhance, and strengthen public and private resource planning for recreation purposes in the USA. An interesting observation is that these types of studies tend to be not highly visible in today’s scholarly citation measures such as SSCI or Google Scholar. The value of research in supporting public policy-making and its implications in improving Americans’ quality of life, however, cannot be more underscored in this case. Its long-term impact has reached far beyond what citation indexes can suggest.

The 1990s and 2000s represent two decades of full-time engagement with tourism for Joe. Outdoor recreation participants are for the most part tourists, and therefore the shift to tourism signifies an extension of his previous work rather than a departure from it. Through Scott Meis and Park Canada, Joe started his more than two-decade research engagement with Tourism Canada. True to his roots in natural resources, Tourism Canada initially solicited Joe’s expertise to learn more about international park visitors since parks represent one of their primary visited attractions. His attention was on long-haul international travellers to North America’s park systems and beyond. This was an extremely productive period of time for Joe. Socio-demographic influences and destination activities were two predominant research themes, threading a prolific collection of publications in the 1990 and beyond, before he shifted his role from a researcher to an academic administrator in the early 2000s. Age effect, for example, was found to be especially pronounced in affecting international tourist activity involvement. He and his collaborators published a series of studies related to age and long-haul travel using data evidences from international markets including West Germany, United Kingdom, South Korea, Australia, and Japan. His research on age and cohort effect of mature Japanese travellers to North America (2000) won the Martin Oppermann Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing Best Article Award (2000).

Joe’s research on destination activities preceded the now popularly scrutinized construct of tourism experience. What tourists actually do at a destination constitutes a core element of tourism experience. Joe developed a series of long-haul traveller typologies based on their activity involvement patterns at North American destinations. He established and empirically tested a series of model delineations of the multivariate relationships among tourism activities, motivations and benefits, travel philosophies, destination attribute preferences, and other trip-related factors of international markets to North America. This effort greatly advanced our understanding of what long-haul travellers actually do when they visit North American places. His research has generated a wealth of knowledge for tourism experience planning — insights coveted by both travel industry practitioners and academic researchers alike.
Dr Data

Along with Joe’s commitment to provide science-based discoveries to assist state and federal agencies in their policy decision-making is his decades’ long engagement with databases gathered by these agencies. Joe saw the under-utilization of government agency datasets early in his academic career and was determined to provide value-added data services to these agencies. Too often, the rich data collected by these agencies at considerable costs are underutilized by the research community. Many of them were never explored beyond an initial report based on single dimensional statistical tallying. Over the years, Joe has painstakingly acquired a collection of these large-scale data series; most of which are longitudinal. Some exemplary nationwide longitudinal datasets that he has worked with are the U.S. National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation (FHWAR, since 1955), the U.S. Outdoor Recreation Participation Survey (since 1958), North American Pleasure Travel Markets (PTAMs, since 1986), and the Inflight Survey (since 1983). It is fitting that Joe has been nicknamed ‘Data Junkie’ and threatened for years to have a ‘DR DATA’ license plate on his car.

The first tourism-specific dataset that Joe examined was the Pleasure Travel Markets to North America (PTAMs). Joe’s partnership with Scott Meis and his reputation as a methodologist made him a recipient of Tourism Canada’s large datasets. It is a survey program jointly commissioned to Coopers & Lybrand Consulting by the Canadian Tourism Commission, the U.S. Tourism Industries/International Trade Administration, and the Secretaria de Turismo, Mexico. The PTAMs included national surveys conducted in Australia, Brazil, Mexico, Singapore, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Italy, South Korea, Venezuela, the Netherlands, and Taiwan. The data series started in 1985 and ended in 1995. The PTAMs represented, and perhaps is still one of the largest data collection efforts jointly conducted by tourism agencies from multiple countries. The rigor, depth, and breadth of the datasets offered unrivalled richness of information, allowing Joe and his research team a 360-degree view of the long-haul travellers to North America. Although there were minor adjustments in the instruments, the consistency in measure and sampling procedure across countries, as well as across time, allowed Joe to generate remarkable nation-specific and cross-cultural views of the long-haul travelers to North America.

Methodological considerations of national recreation inventory and participation data were a clear domain of research interest for Joe as he made a number of recommendations including, for instance, his suggestion to include quality of life variables and social group variables in the national surveys for natural resource planning and management. Over the years, Joe published a series of studies related to methodological deliberations for population-wide tourism data collection and analysis. Some examples of such include: ‘Applying Nationwide Recreation Survey Data in Developing Recreation Policy and Planning Options O’Leary, McGuire, and Dottavio (1987)’, ‘A Perspective on Data, Information and Knowledge O’Leary (1995)’, ‘Does the Suggestion that Respondents Recall Events Chronologically Significantly Influence the Data Collected? (2000)’, ‘Data Management in Tourism: Chaotic and Quixotic O’Leary (2000)’, ‘The Impact of Seemingly Minor Methodological Changes on Estimates of Travel and Correcting Bias’ Beaman, O’Leary, and Smith (2000)’, and ‘Recall Salience: Concept, Use and Estimation Beaman, Hill, and O’Leary (2002).’

A network energizer

Joe has built an extraordinarily productive academic career through his extensive work with local, state, and federal agencies. That, however, can only be a partial view of Joe
without a discourse of the incredible impact that Joe has had on others. Borrowing a social network term, he is a node in a network with critical centrality value. He is a network energizer who raises the productivity level of the people in his network.

Through his work, his collection of national datasets, and later in his role as an academic administrator, Joe attracted a large network of individuals. He radiates so much energy, passion, and professional grace that they become contagious and have made him a magnet for building an intellectual powerhouse. In addition to his own students, his research network has academic research collaborators from across the globe, field practitioners/researchers and statisticians, and young faculty mentees and colleagues. Joe is the one who always sees opportunities and creates room for people in his network to make meaningful contributions. He is committed to principles larger than his self-interest.

Throughout his career, Joe has been remarkably successful in acquiring grants and contracts to fund his work and his graduate students. In his Purdue years in the late 1980s and 1990s, at any given year, he would have three, four, and sometimes even more graduate students fully funded by his research grants. Many of Joe’s former students concur that without Joe’s generous financial support, their lives would not be where they are. Those real-life research projects were also a natural training ground. What he insists on is for all his students to be able to be engaged in real-life projects. At one point, his research laboratory was nicknamed the ‘southern research branch’ of Canadian Tourism Commission. Joe is one of the few who were able to obtain agency grants in an unfriendly US tourism grants environment. Some examples of organizations from which he successfully obtained grants include the following: the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Park Service, the Sea Grant, the Indiana Division of Tourism, and the Tourism Canada/Canadian Tourism Commission.

Joe’s outdoor recreation and tourism laboratory was always a place where ideas were debated and conceived, a place where research programs were formulated and teams were formed, and a place where mental road blocks that young scholars so often encountered melted away. The joy of discovery was celebrated so outlandishly. Joe created an environment that encouraged young researchers to venture beyond the conventional disciplinary boundary. He was never the one who would bulldoze over other people’s ideas. He genuinely enjoyed the weekly Friday brownbag research brainstorming sessions as much as, if not more than, his students and collaborators. Those informal, lively, and sometimes intense research discussions brought out so much synergy, creativity, and sense of community. The laboratory witnessed regular and enthusiastic attendance of people from as near as neighbouring departments on the Purdue campus to as far away as visitors from James Cook University, Australia. Joe orchestrated those Friday sessions with his research insights, data, connections, openness, and the audacity to venture and challenge, all couched in coffee, tea, bagels, and that touch of Irish warmth (Joe is Irish). His ability to connect minds was remarkable. The research community he instigated and nurtured was as diverse as the United Nations. During my years (late 1990s) in his laboratory, his students came from Indiana, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Taiwan, South Korea, China, and Ghana. Those relationships remain cherished. While the bonds that Joe nurtured remain as strong as ever, the generation of young researchers he trained has carried his scholarship tradition to various parts of the world in both academia and the research-consulting world.

What epitomizes the O’Leary spirit is Joe’s generosity. With his steady guiding hand, his research vision, his generous data, and financial support, the young scholars in his research community blossomed. With no exception, he claimed no lead authorship in the large collection of publications he has worked with his students and other research partners. ‘You need it more than I do’ would be his standard line. That takes a scholar with
a truly big heart. Joe’s ability to rally people around him was just as palpable after he took on the responsibility of being the department head of the recreation, park, and tourism management program at Texas A&M University. As an administrator, Joe can be best described as a system synchronizer. He was skilled at orchestration of large-scale collaborative initiatives among faculty scholars, industry practitioners, and graduate researchers. His passion, energy, and integrity brought the best and brightest out of everyone. Joe reminds people of a symphony conductor who directs individuals to produce a harmonious piece. The orchestrated sum is much more than the individual pieces. As a leader, he was able to synchronize different personalities and forces into a coordination of events and to operate an academic unit in unison. He ‘developed a social cohesion within our department that did not exist beforehand. He wanted our academic department to be ‘preeminent’ in the field; he strived for that and led us towards that goal (M. Schuett, personal communication, November 2014).’

**Conclusion**

The tourism discipline as it is today can be attributed to early scholars from related fields, whose scholarly activities have helped shape its multi-pillared foundation. Joe is the one who hailed from the natural resource paradigm. Joe believes that research should be integral to the practice of the field and have public policy implications that affect society at large. Joe’s advanced statistical and computing skills enabled him to earn a reputation of a highly respected methodologist and allowed him to effectively engage government agencies in a constant conversation about how to optimally utilize population-wide user data to facilitate policy decisions and advance field knowledge. What is special about Joe is his uncanny ability to be bilingual: he is extremely comfortable speaking both the academic/science language and the practitioners’ language. He is a methodologist who painstakingly ensures rigor in research design and analysis and yet has a unique gift to interpret and present scientific results in ways that are understood and appreciated by practitioners. Joe’s academic success attests to a synergistic scenario of discipline knowledge advancement and industry engagement.

Joe is a guiding force, a symphony conductor, a social influencer, a network energizer, and system synchronizer. That is the collective tribute to his many gifts from the people who call him an advisor, a mentor, a colleague, a collaborator, and a friend. Joe’s academic profile, while demonstrative of a stellar level of productivity in terms of volume, does not come close to defining his legacy in our collective judgment. As his former colleagues in Texas A&M University put it, ‘Joe is a modest man. Others come first’ (J. Crompton, personal communication, 4 November 2014). Both in his earlier role of being a producer of research as a faculty member and later role of a facilitator of research in his role as an administrator, Joe exemplifies a selfless approach where he does not promote himself. He promotes others with whom he is connected. His high energy, effervescence, and enthusiasm in research pursuits and administration sustain and raise the level of all individuals around him. As his long-time collaborator and friend Philip Pearce put it, ‘For me, Joe O’Leary embodies the best qualities of the American academic style’ (personal communication, 1 November 2014). Joe generously attributes and defers accomplishments to people he mentors and with whom he works. Instead of marketing himself, his career highlights are cast in the glory of fledging scholars he has nurtured, the institutions at which he has worked, and colleagues he has worked with. He has always been the steady guiding hand and wisdom that everyone wishes they would be blessed to have in their pursuit of happiness in academia.
Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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