Programs That Work

The Roving Leader Program In San Antonio

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Abstract: This article describes the Roving Leader Program in San Antonio, Texas. Street workers are supplying an important means of reaching youth who are hanging out on street corners and not coming into the recreation centers. The targeted geographic areas include public housing communities and areas with income levels in the low to moderate range. Specific objectives include outreach, increasing self-esteem, respect for others, and providing a link to the numerous services available to youth and their families. The bottom-line is to take a preventative approach to crime and violence.

Keywords: roving leader, street workers, crime prevention, at-risk youth

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Background

The evolution of Roving Leader programs can be traced back to the mid-19th century when churchmen and charity workers worked with young delinquents and city gangs in the slum areas of the emerging American cities. The first organized youth outreach initiative appears to have been the Chicago Area Project that was launched in the mid-1930s to reach youth on the streets. In 1948, the New York City Youth Board organized an outreach program targeted at gangs in Harlem, and in the 1950s youth street outreach efforts were operating in San Francisco and Los Angeles, California; Rochester and Buffalo, New York; and other cities. A review of these early programs was prepared by Joe Bannon from the University of Illinois in a report he produced for NRPA in 1969 (Bannon, 1969).

The Roving Leader Program in San Antonio was launched in 1972 in response to the question: "How can we reach those youngsters who are hanging-out on street corners and not coming to our community centers?" Even though such programs had operated elsewhere, San Antonio professionals did not appear to have been aware of them. Their commitment to
outreach emerged from managers in the Parks and Recreation Department who perceived it to be a rational strategy for addressing the issue. The original leaders were hired with federal job training funds and throughout the 1970s they continued to be funded by the federal CETA job training program. When CETA funds were terminated, many recreation positions in the city were lost. Preference was given to replacing staff, who were no longer funded, in recreation centers; therefore, the Roving Leader Program was eliminated. It was allowed to die because at the beginning of the 1980s, recreation services for at-risk youth were not perceived to be critically important to the city.

By 1992, the public’s and decision makers’ perceptions of the role of recreation services had changed. Juvenile crime had grown exponentially and there was an outcry for the city to address the problem. City council members were under pressure to listen to the community and turned to the department’s professionals for advice. Some major decision makers in the city were personally impacted by this crime wave, which resulted in them being highly sensitized to it:

- A council member’s son was an innocent bystander victim in a drive-by shooting.
- The city manager was robbed of his wallet in the driveway of his home by two youths.
- Mayor Henry Cisneros resided in a district of town in which violent acts were happening.
- His successor, Mayor Wolf, had a son who was picked up by police on a playground for being out after curfew.

For the first time, youth crime was impacting decision makers, whereas in the past they had not been personally touched by it. These personal experiences coincided with a shift in philosophy with mayors being elected who were more proactive towards prevention. Mayor Cisneros challenged the city staff to try different approaches to problems, and the current city manager’s motto is “If it isn’t broke, break it.” In addition, some individuals who had personally benefitted from involvement in the original Roving Leader Program 20 years previously were now in influential positions on the city council and on city staff.

**Funding**

This convergence of factors resulted in the Roving Leader Program being resurrected in 1992. Initially, money came from a UPARR (Urban Parks and Recreation Recovery) grant and from the San Antonio Housing Authority that had received federal grants for alleviating drug abuse. The city also included some general fund support and this has increased as the grant funds have declined.
The targeted geographic areas include public housing communities and areas of minority populations with income levels in the low to moderate range. These areas have some of the highest crime rates in the city, and the youth served are considered to be at-risk. Although service areas are identified, fixed boundary lines do not exist. The Roving Leaders can go where the targeted clients are, not where the department thinks they should be or where they would like them to be. The program’s goal is to provide a healthy and rewarding recreation program where traditional programs are not available. See Figure 1.

Figure 1
The Roving Leader’s Mandate

Mike Gonzaba heads up the San Antonio Park and Recreation Department’s At-Risk Youth Initiative. He explains the mandate of the Roving Leaders in the following terms:

The Roving Leader program offers young people in targeted at-risk areas the same recreation programs that the department offers at its community centers, but there is more one-on-one communication. We go to them instead of waiting for them to come to us.

How many of us in our careers have said, ‘Geez, if my hands were not tied, I could do this, this, and this with these kids?’ This is what the department empowers the Roving Leaders to do. There are legal parameters we have to abide with, but we say to them, ‘You go out into this particular area of town, seek out youngsters who are either doing nothing constructive or are engaged in antisocial activities. Work with them. Determine on the spot what needs to be done to move them in a positive direction—recreational activities, ping-pong games, basketball games, job referrals, taking them to a clinic, working with their families, or whatever.’

The Roving Leaders have a lot of flexibility—much more than our staff in recreation centers—and that is a key to their success. They are not social workers, but they know where those services are available. If a leader comes across an individual who has been kicked out of school, for example, then he knows all the school principals in the area, knows the kid’s family, and can try to resolve the behavior that precipitated suspension. That’s what a Roving Leader does.

Program Goals

The specific objectives of the programs are as follows:

1. To reach out to at-risk youth who do not participate in, know about, or avail themselves of traditional recreational activities and other social services offered by the city.
2. To teach them the importance of team play, not necessarily as a sports concept but as a way of life.

3. To develop their self-esteem and the importance of respect for themselves and others, regardless of neighborhood, skin color, or belonging to a particular group or organization.

4. To provide and to make them aware of the numerous services available to them and their families. The bottom-line is to take a preventative approach to crime and violence.

Set-up

The Roving Leader Program operates in six neighborhoods. In three of them the leader has an assistant, so there are nine personnel. In the summer an additional three assistants are hired to work with the Roving Leaders. The primary target clientele is youth aged 6 to 19, with special emphasis on those under 16 because that age cohort is not mobile and often cannot get to recreation programs in centers. A weakness of the present program is that there are no female leaders or assistants, and without female leaders it is difficult to develop a program for young females.

The annual budget for personnel, car allowance, equipment, and supplies is $200,000. The Roving Leaders have a support-base facility in the neighborhood, but they operate out of the back of their vehicles. They supply their own automobiles, but the city reimburses them with a mileage allowance. The Roving Leaders seek out the traditional hangouts of youth, especially in the housing projects, such as parking lots, street corners and sports centers. They offer activities such as basketball, volleyball, softball, football, and some quiet games; they talk to them, counsel them, encourage them to stay in or return to school, gain their confidence, and keep them involved in positive activity.

Staffing

The key to the program's success is the staff who operate it. The program only works because it has the right staff. It is not the program content that is important, it is the leaders. Roving Leaders have to gain and to retain the trust of youth in the area, their parents, and institutions operating them; they have to know how to organize and to teach recreational activities and to know the array of referral services that are available to support youth in the area.

The current supervisor of the Roving Leader Program was originally recruited by a leader assigned to his neighborhood to be the leader's assistant. The supervisor hung out with friends at a basketball court in a neighborhood church's grounds. The leader came there one day, introduced himself, and visited with the group. He explained the goals of the program. The basketball court was used as the basic meeting place for their interaction. As a result of the program, the current supervisor was moti-
vated to stay in school and go on to college, after which he returned to work in a recreation center.

All of the Roving Leaders were recruited from the neighborhoods in which they now work or from adjacent neighborhoods. This is critical. A local person who is equipped to do the job is much more likely to be successful than an individual from elsewhere within the department who has to be retrained. Typically, they had a background of voluntary work in the neighborhood and before becoming a Roving Leader, were vocal advocates of improving their community. James describes how he became a Roving Leader:

I was involved in a lot of volunteer activities in the southwest part of town where I live. I was in the Neighborhood Association that was trying to stop crime in the area. When the department director and recreation superintendent came to an association meeting, I was there. I was very vocal, asking lots of questions and challenging them. The director asked "Who is this guy?" I asked them how I could get employed by the city to do this kind of work. They encouraged me to apply and with a recommendation from the Neighborhood Association for the position, I was hired.

Another leader, Ralph, was in the program as a youth in the 1970s. When the trailer with basketball hoops arrived in his neighborhood, he participated. As he got older, he volunteered and worked with youth in the neighborhood. He started and organized a basketball tournament held each year in a local park in which over 300 youth play. It was a major event in the neighborhood and required working with the city. This is how he got to know the city recreation staff. They were impressed with his commitment to the youth and his knowledge and acceptance in the neighborhood, so when he applied for a Roving Leader position he was hired. Ralph notes, "I was born and raised in this area; I'm well-known here. I know how the kids around here think."

The leaders were well-known and respected in the targeted neighborhoods before working in this program for the city. They did not have to sell themselves to the community since the trust between them and the neighborhood parents and youth was already established. James, one of the Roving Leaders, made the following statement:

There are many good kids in these areas who do not want to be involved in gangs and drugs. We go in and try to keep them out. We take on those who want to better themselves. They know if they are going to be a part of what I have to offer, they have to go along with my rules and regulations. When I need help, then the parents come and volunteer. They said, 'Whatever you want from us, you got it—just as long as you help keep John out of trouble.' As a Roving Leader, that's a big advantage you have. You are out there visiting the homes so you can meet the parents. This is very different from operating a recreation center, where the kids come to you and you never get to see the parents.
It has frequently been pointed out in reports that working with at-risk youth on a daily basis, seeking to address their problems and to positively impact their lives is emotionally exhausting. Burnout by staff in these positions is an often-cited problem. However, turnover in the Roving Leader program in San Antonio has been minimal. The leaders quickly recognize whether or not this type of work is for them. James observes,

I've been doing this for 21 years. You don't get burnt out. The love that you have for these children you work with is the driving force. When one of them comes back after they have succeeded and says 'thank you,' that keeps you going. It is a different experience and challenge every day.

Clearly, the work of a Roving Leader is more than a profession, it is a calling. This work has to be done by inspired individuals; it is not enough to be well-trained in the recreation field. See Figure 2.

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**Figure 2**

A Roving Leader Goes to Court

I just went to court for a 15-year-old boy, who has been with me since he was eight. He got caught in a drive-by shooting with a group of friends. I knew there was no way this guy could hold a gun and shoot it at someone. He was a real good kid. His mother told me his probation officer was and I knew him real well. I talked to him about it, and he trusted my judgment.

He said, 'I needed to hear what you told me, because the police were looking at him as being hard core.' We went to court and talked to the judge. She wanted to know what I was doing there because this kid was Hispanic and I am Black. When I told her, she appreciated what I had to say. I told her, 'He may have been involved with friends and been talked into it, but I know his character. He is not hard core. There is no way he shot a gun. He made a mistake by being there, but it was peer pressure. I know he wasn’t an active participant. Everybody makes mistakes and I urge you to give him a chance to redeem himself.'

Ralph is based in the biggest public housing area in the city and acknowledged that the neighborhood and the work could be viewed by others as tough. "On my first day on the job, the guy who was hired with me quit. The next guy they hired as my partner only lasted until lunch time on his first day." However, the Roving Leaders derive an extraordinary amount of satisfaction and fulfillment from their work. Ralph says,

There were drive-by shootings every day when I started and people asked me why I stayed. The answer is—because I loved them. I know deep inside what I wanted to do, and when I took this job I knew it was what someone had in mind for me. I love working with kids; that is the key for me. I have never turned my back on them. They will have the last dime in my pocket, the shirt off my back, a ride to wherever they or their parents need to go.
If you are a good person yourself, you know which other people are good. I have never had a problem with shooting or fighting. I know I am good at getting kids to respect each other. I move them between neighborhoods and force them to mix with different kids whom they think they dislike. In a few weeks they are calling each other on the phone. When they get to know each other through playing recreation activities, they lose the distrust and become friends. When I take strange kids into a neighborhood, I tell the community they are with me to play ball and won't cause trouble. They never do. Everybody trusts me so it works. There is never a problem. Sunday is supposed to be my day off, but I get calls all the time asking me to come and solve one problem or another. I don't mind it.

Similarly, James also reiterates the calling:

We are father, uncle, lawyer, teacher, brother, minister to these children. We are the male gaps in their lives because most of them are from single-parent families, and most of their parents are unemployed.

This work is fun, it is not stressful. I know how to talk with the kids; how to deal with them. When you have a love for kids in your heart, there is no stress. You just move away one obstacle at a time to help them, and with experience you know how to move the obstacles. I realize there's only so much I can do, and I stay positive. The situations are always different. Every day it is different things for different kids, which reduces the danger of burnout. When they grow up, they ask us to be their kid's godfather. They say 'thank you' for what we did. We become part of their family. I am invited to weddings, birthday parties, and baptisms. That makes you feel good. I won't burnout.

Each month the Roving Leaders come together for a special seminar geared to furthering their skills and to exchange ideas. In addition, they are encouraged to participate in training programs offered by other city and nonprofit social service organizations.

The department has developed a manual that is used in the initial training period when a new leader is hired. This is supplemented by the new hiree going into a neighborhood with an experienced leader for a few days to learn from him.

Cooperation with Other Agencies

Among many youth in these neighborhoods is a loss of confidence in the established service systems and/or a lack of understanding of those support systems. Thus, part of the mission of Roving Leaders is to establish links between their clientele's needs and organizations that can help meet them.

This requires cooperation with an array of other agencies and organizations. For example, five years ago "Operation Cool It" was launched in the southwest part of the city; it incorporated a curfew. When the city initiated the curfew, the councilman in that part of town did not want it. He wanted alternatives. He wanted to know what else could be
done with youngsters from 7 P.M. to 10 P.M. at night to "cool it?" The city funded expanded hours of operation at recreation centers. They authorized the health department to go into recreation centers to give screenings and immunizations. Roving Leaders directed their clients to these services. The police department brought mobile jails and mobile substations into the area. Social workers came in to walk the streets with Roving Leaders, and this combined effort cleared up many of the problems in that area. The total initiative was coordinated by the neighborhood's Roving Leader.

The Roving Leaders do not have to confine their activities to recreation. Recreation is the medium they use to reach the youth and make contact with them. James commented,

I'm interested in the whole kid, in helping him do better in life. Recreation is just the hook to get into a relationship with him. It's what I use to collar him. If I organize a basketball game, kids are there. You have to have some way to get them in. If I told them to meet me in church or school, I wouldn't get any of them, but ask them to play basketball and they will be there. However, slowly but surely, I can then get them into different community organizations as our relationship strengthens. Now, I work with some ministers, and on Sundays I go around and pick some of them up and get them involved in the community churches. At first, just once a month then more. Eventually their attitudes to church and school change. I've seen this happen with a bunch of kids. We won't change all of their lives, but at least those who need help now have someone they know and trust to get it from.

Gaining Support for the Program

The Roving Leaders complete a daily written report on the youth with whom they interact, actions they took, and referrals they made. These are turned into the program's supervisor, who then summarizes them into an aggregate report. These reports constitute the basis on which the program is formally evaluated, but it is the emotional grass-roots community support that is crucial in securing continued city funding.

The neighborhood residents are aware of the program's positive impact. If there were attempts to cut the program, the Roving Leaders are confident that parents, church leaders and business leaders in their neighborhoods would vigorously and vociferously make known to the council their opposition to such cuts. In addition, the council members are frequently invited by leaders to join them on-site and talk to the neighborhood people. Hence, they know how the program works and the regard with which it is held in the community.

Most of the program's promotion is accomplished through word of mouth and through the public housing residents' associations. There is no attempt to build a wider constituency beyond the impacted neighborhoods by showcasing the Roving Leader program in the media because of a
concern that this would stigmatize the clientele being served. It is felt that publicizing the program in this way could result in negative labelling.

Reference


Footnote

1Information in this article is taken from written program descriptions supplied by the San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department and notes taken during interviews with Mike Gonzaba, youth services manager, and several Roving Leaders' workers from the department.

Acknowledgments

Material for this article was collected via interviews with staff from the San Antonio Parks and Recreation Department. Special appreciation is extended to Mike Gonzaba, youth services manager, for his assistance in supplying background material for the article.
Resource Reviews


In this book John Miles thoroughly chronicles the history of the National Parks Association (NPA) from its origins in 1919 to the present. His full access to NPA archives gives us an insider’s view of the organization and its leaders. Unlike many “official” histories of organizations, this work is largely free from boosterism and evasion of controversy. Miles confirms the common criticism of the NPA’s record as purist and at times inflexible. The NPA was unwilling to compromise on high standards for inclusion in the national park system and favored spiritual and educational uses as opposed to commercial or recreational uses of park resources. The beginning of the NPA, Miles notes, was dominated by a small group of successful, mostly eastern men of science and education who, in the progressivist tradition of civic activism, attempted to serve as watchdogs of the National Park Service. Unrestricted by bureaucratic constraints or political expedience, the NPA was free to pursue its vision of a park system that preserved wilderness and insisted that each new park offer unique scenic and natural wonders.

Miles provides a detailed documentary history of NPA struggles with park service appointees, economic interests, and politicians, interlacing it with a blow by blow account of the NPA’s organizational problems and achievements. As early as 1920, the NPA fought Idaho farmers seeking an irrigation reservoir partially in Yellowstone. These ardent preservationists repeatedly lobbied against despoilment of parks by lumbering, power, water, and hunting interests. From 1923, the NPA battled commercialism in proposals for a “Southwestern All-Year National Park” and pressure for establishing national parks in eastern states near population centers for recreational purposes. These struggles set an often repeated pattern of upholding “standards” for inclusion in the national system and opposing purely recreational uses of parks. While the park service embraced the politically popular idea of developing parks for family camping and scenic drives, the NPA opposed the Blue Ridge Parkway, for example, in the 1930s. Its concerns for “standards” made the NPA an opponent of the Olympic National Park, perhaps unwittingly allying with timber interests.

Miles weaves into this history the often complex story of a small, chronically under-funded organization. He gives us detailed accounts of financial crises, membership drives, and thumbnail sketches of the succession of leaders and their relations with park service officials. The uncompromising style of Robert Yard, who dominated the organization in the 1920s
and 1930s, is contrasted with the more diplomatic Sigurd Olson, who was president through most of the 1950s.

Although the book is primarily an "internal" history of the NPA, Miles recognizes the impact of the wider world. By the 1960s, the narrow focus of the NPA upon park preservation gave way to the broader environmental movement. Similarly, growth in membership and legal constraints upon lobbying (required to preserve tax status) led to an end to the volunteer tradition of trustee control and the rise of the professional leadership of lawyer Anthony Smith in 1967. The National Park and Conservation Association (as it became called in 1970) continued to protect natural wonders like the Grand Canyon and the Everglades from development projects. However, overextension into population, immigration, and other "global" issues, as well as administrative failures and unstable membership roles, led to Smith's ouster in 1980.

While the organization returned to its roots in park preservation, it remained true to the broader conservation theme; staff remained professional, rebuilding the organization and combatting the indifference of government in the Reagan years to preserving wilderness.

This book will delight park service and environmental movement insiders with its detailed chronology of personality and event. As a historian, I wish the book had contained more analysis of the intellectual and social origins of the NPA and had attempted to place the NPA more fully into the context of other pressure groups and educational groups fostering natural resource preservation. The heavy reliance upon NPCA records at points gives the book tunnel vision. Still, Miles' careful historical account forcefully reveals the continuity in the debate over natural resources. The players in this struggle may have changed names and faces, but the old battles are endlessly repeated. Although the NPCA has surely been transformed in leadership and even philosophy over the years, it is hard not to be impressed by its accomplishments—despite its size and, at times, inflexibility.

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The field of natural resource management presents to its managers an interesting and challenging dichotomy—it must address not only the physical qualities of the resource, but also the quality of the visitors’ experiences and their influence on the resource. *Natural Resource Management, The Human Dimension* is an artful compilation of timely and relevant resource management issues dedicated to an evolving ecological perspective held by today’s society—in essence, the natural environment is perceived as a complex system that must not ignore the influence of human beings. Alan Ewert, editor, has carefully combined the work of experts from various dimensions of natural resource management. For example, recreation, forestry, psychology, sociology, environmental science, public policy, geography, and wildlife management are addressed from a human experience perspective. *The Human Dimension* includes 15 chapters that balance perspectives from professional planners and policy makers as well as researchers involved in critical evaluation of the natural resource management process. Schroeder (1996), best describes the central thesis of this manuscript by stating “if we want to understand how people are related to environments such as forests, then we need to understand how people experience these environments” (Ewert, 1996, p. 14).

Individual chapters are linked through an integrated understanding of major social trends, such as 1) the public is questioning authority and taking stake in management decisions concerning public lands and the subsequent of management decisions surrounding them, 2) there is a paradigm shift occurring within our society from anthropocentric to the new environmental paradigm (NEP); as a result, people are less concerned with what we can “extract” from our natural resources and increasingly concerned with their inherent qualities, and 3) the general public is far more aware of natural resources issues, yet less cognizant of environmental interrelationships, (Ewert, 1996).

Other books have examined policy issues, partnerships, ecological practices, and recreation management, yet *The Human Dimension* addresses the complex nature of these issues through an interdisciplinary approach, Human Dimensions Research (HDR). Direct uses of HDR and its implementation into a working evaluation program are defined and demonstrated with “real-life” scenarios and management policy issues. While each area of natural resource management has its own particular emphasis, the authors identify the need for HDR throughout a wide-range of issues expressed by members of organizations and parks across the country. For example, Ewert has sub-divided important themes into four parts. The first section of the book identifies critical aspects of HDR and its relationship to natural resource management. Authors within this section accentuate the importance of “matters of the heart” and publicly held value systems that are often overlooked or considered as “soft” evidence in the
scientific community. I found *Part One* to be a refreshing overview of the truly important aspects of managing for and sustaining "fragile experiences."

After an excellent introduction to HDR in *Part One*, the second section offers readers an opportunity to select areas of specific interest in natural resource management and look at applied examples of HDR. In *Part Two*, the authors provide a succinct review of direct application of HDR concepts to a wide range of areas, from wildlife management to global perspectives on environmental change. The authors are careful to present both advantages and limitations of HDR in their respective disciplines. This assessment is helpful and provides managers, researchers, students, etc. with an informed and comprehensive perspective for research and/or implementation. For example, Chapter 7 (Driver, Manning, & Peterson, 1996) identifies procedures and a methodology for integrating social and biophysical elements into sustainable management. Utilizing the USDA Forest Service as a primary example, the authors establish step by step procedures of a model that places equal emphasis on both natural and human ecological aspects. Procedures of this nature force both social and bio-physical researchers to clearly identify what information is missing and, as a result, what data must be collected in order to proceed. In many ways, the guidelines or steps suggested in the integration model support ideas in similar models presented in recreation and park management research such as *Limit of Acceptable Change* (LAC) (Spankey, McCool, & Stokes, 1986) and the Visitor Impact Management System (VIM) (Graefe, Kuss, & Vaske, 1987). Overall, the techniques, research, models, and considerations presented in *Part Two* will ultimately bridge a precarious gap in the implementation of HDR by presenting realistic guidelines to assist managers in representing the interests and concerns of the general public.

The chapters in *Part Three* continue to emphasize the importance of public interaction throughout the public process. Each chapter addresses tools that identify publics in relation to the environmental or management change, as well as techniques for increasing the effectiveness of the actual communication process. From identifying steps in a federally mandated Social Impact Assessment (SIA) to important modeling and mapping strategies, the authors recognize the need for the development of "user friendly" techniques. Another major theme is that steps towards understanding social implications associated with environmental change must be flexible and repetitious in order to capture the evolving dimensions of the entire ecosystem.

As a lifetime learner in outdoor recreation, neophyte researcher, teacher, and seasonal employee of a federal land management agency, I saw the most important aspects of this book to be ideas supporting and justifying the necessity of understanding human action and interaction within the environments we embrace for a multitude of uses. Additionally, to know there is a philosophy of study that emphasizes the importance of the inclusion of the human race in ecosystems is a great relief. I am deeply encouraged by the presence of a manuscript that addresses timely and relevant issues about
our natural resources that are management friendly and include a realistic
evaluation of the hurdles that must be overcome. As I read each chapter, real
issues introduced in the text echoed in the halls of the federal agency by
which I am employed. This is not a theoretical masterpiece utilized to
decorate a shelf of colorful coffee table books, to be occasionally browsed
by a curious passerby. Rather, Natural Resource Management: The Human
Dimension is a collection of works that have immediate and "sustainable"
application for managing quality experiences or "fragile experiences"
within those resources for future generations to come.

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research on the South Fork of the American River as her doctoral disserta-
tion in the spring of 1997.

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