



Beyond Fun and Gains - True Benefits of Recreation

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We've heard it all before, "personal recreational activities involves those actions that relax, refresh and rejuvenate us" - yet how much do we truly gain from participating in these activities?

The purpose of this article is to discuss the physical, mental, and social health benefits resulting from participating in recreational activities. Although many other important benefits are documented, (increased

environmental stewardship, job opportunities, and a variety of economical benefits) this article will focus on current research documenting some of the physical, mental and social benefits.

Corie Stancliff works as a student assistant with the Planning Division of California Department of Parks and Recreation. Her goal was to research the non-economic benefits derived from recreation. This research material will be used by the Planning Division in developing California's Outdoor Recreation Plan.

Having fun is not the ONLY reason to recreate!

Understanding how recreation benefits our society is a managerial component essential to everyone in this profession. It is the responsibility of parks and recreation providers to adequately inform and educate people about recreation choices and their affiliated benefits.

According to the 2001 Surgeon General's Report "*A Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*", over 60 million people, (1/3 of the U.S. population) are overweight. Overweight and obesity are associated with heart disease, certain types of cancer, type II diabetes, respiratory problems, and psychological problems such as depression and fatigue. It has been proven that participating in meaningful recreational activity aids in the prevention of disease and improves mental health. (Presidents Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, www.fitness.gov.)

- **Coronary Heart Disease**

Coronary heart disease is America's leading cause of death. Physical inactivity is the single greatest factor leading to coronary heart disease. As a result, exercise is especially important to improve public health. Bicycling and walking can help to fill America's physical inactivity void and make a major contribution to public health. Moderate activity, such as walking for 30-60 minutes a day several days a week, is associated with significant reductions in the incidents and mortality of coronary heart disease. (Texas Heart Institute, www.texasheartinstitute.org)

- **Cancer**

Cancer is the second leading cause of death, after heart disease, in the United States. In 1994, the American Cancer Society estimated that 540,000 Americans died from cancer, while 1,210,000 new cases of this disease occurred that same year.

Recreation, fitness, sports and active living has been shown to help in the prevention of site specific cancers - particularly in the colon, breast and lungs. (PCPFS, www.fitness.gov).

- **Diabetes**

According to the 1996 Surgeon General's report, "Physical Activity and Health", Taking a brisk walk outside can postpone and possibly prevent the development of type II diabetes in people who are overweight and whose bodies have already started having trouble metabolizing glucose.

IMPROVES MENTAL HEALTH

Recreation is a proven therapeutic tool used in hospitals, clinics, and communities everywhere – helping to restore physical, mental and social capacities and abilities. Americans who recreate frequently are notably happier with their lives than are other Americans. (Outdoor Recreation Roundtable in America, 1998).

Among active recreationists who reportedly recreate at least twice weekly - 45% reported "complete satisfaction" with their overall quality of life and 49% reported being "fairly well" satisfied. This is compared with only a 25% satisfaction level among Americans who reported no weekly recreation. (Outdoor Recreation Roundtable in America, 1998).

Recreation also:

- enhances personal growth
- both mild and clinical depression can be reduced
- helps to build self-esteem and confidence, especially in youth
- reduces tension and anxiety
- encourages spiritual renewal and personal growth
- increases mental relaxation
- generates a general sense of well being

For further information contact the Center for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov.

SOCIETAL BENEFITS

Cultural Diversity

Social interaction through recreational activities helps to break down unfamiliarity, fear and isolation (factors associated with racism) and promotes contact between different ethnic groups and the broader community. In addition, recreation promotes the desired image of a community and facilitates community problem solving. The strength of a community is increased through recreation activities that allow people to share cultural and ethnic differences. (The Benefits of Recreation. Canadian Parks and Recreation Association 1997).

"Parks and gardens alone cannot solve the problems faced by our cities, but they are crucial to the health of urban communities. We need to take seriously the evidence that open space counts in human lives and that places where we play can be places of hope." Martin J. Rosin, President of Trust for Public Lands

Person's with Disabilities

Social integration of children and adults with disabilities into community recreation programs offers the chance to develop a positive self-image through successful experiences and satisfying relationships with peers of all abilities. Person's with disabilities gain an improved quality and quantity of social interaction, an increase in motor skills and an enhanced level of self-esteem. (LD Online: The interactive guide to learning disabilities for parents, teachers and children). Check out www.ldonline.org for more information.

Youth

Our nation's young people are, in large measure, inactive, unfit, and increasingly overweight. Ultimately, this could have a devastating impact on our national health care budget.

Young people can build healthier bodies and establish healthy lifestyles by including recreational activities in their daily routine. School and community programs help young people get active and stay active. (The Benefits Catalogue, Canadian Parks and Recreation Association 1997).

According to The Benefits Catalogue, recreational activities have shown to:

- reduce crime rates and vandalism
- help to build self-esteem
- reduce stress and anxiety
- teach positive conflict resolution skills
- provide alternatives to self-destructive behaviors
- positively influence attitudes towards the police

When young people feel good about themselves they operate more effectively and productively in our communities, families and schools. (The Benefits of Recreation, 1997).

Need help with strategies to promote health-related recreation?

The Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Secretary of Education recently released a report outlining ten strategies to promote health and reduce obesity through lifelong participation in enjoyable, safe physical activities and sports. Check out "Promoting Better Health for Young People Through Physical Activity and Sports: A Report to the President", Fall 2000. www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/presphysactrpt/index.htm

New Activities for a "New" Generation

In assessing recreation and its benefits, staying ahead of the game with information about the ever-changing ways to recreate provides valuable insight to program providers. Regular expansion of opportunities allows professionals to reach populations less interested in traditional activities, thereby expanding the gained health and community benefits.

The following are some recreational activities showing increased interest and participation.

- Geocaching – treasure hunting for the 21st century. Armed with a GPS receiver and a set of geographic coordinates telling you the location of a cache or 'treasure chest'. Enthusiasts derive a healthy sense of adventure as players go out and look for caches of goodies, often while traveling backcountry roads or seldom used trails. For more information, contact: www.geocachingworldwide.com
- Ecotourism – responsible travel to pristine areas known for their conservation of the natural environment, it also provides for the economic well being of local people. A great site for professionals and students to explore: www.ecotourism.org.
- Bouldering – A version of rock climbing focusing on various boulder types and sizes in different natural settings without the use of climbing ropes. For more information, contact www.bouldering.com.
- Streetcarving – A skateboard with oversized wheels and high-tech steering mechanisms is expanding the thrilling world of skateboarding. Check out www.streetcarver.com for more information.
- Tree Climbing – A married combination of rock-climbing skills to more conventional arborist techniques used to scale trees. Climbs range from day use, to setting up camp amongst the canopy of a giant sequoia. Climbers strive to leave all trees unharmed, doing most of their climbing not on the tree but on a rope. The development of tree climbing equipment even

includes a hammock, designed for spending the night suspended from treetops. For information, contact www.treeclimbingworld.com.

In conclusion, while recreation can play a significant role in preventing or reducing such diseases as coronary heart disease, cancer, diabetes and obesity, it may also have a dramatic effect to the overall quality of people's lives. Although many benefits were not discussed within the context of this article, the physical, mental and societal benefits gained from parks and recreation are well beyond the fun and games derived by participants.

It is absolutely crucial professionals stay abreast of recreational opportunities and the evolution of recreation itself.

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