

ISSUE 3. Access to Public Park and Recreation Resources

Obstacles keep park and recreation lands, facilities and programs from being fully accessible to all Californians further decreasing the relevancy of the services provided.

Obstacles that impede access to park and outdoor recreation resources present themselves in many ways, affecting users and potential users differently. These obstacles can be physical, environmental, socioeconomic, demographic and administrative in nature, and they may be real or perceived.

Physical obstacles to park and recreation resources, facilities and services are those that inhibit reasonable access due to proximity in distance and time from where people live, location and distribution of facilities, the adequacy and desirability of features and design criteria that may limit or impede mobility. Proximity concerns include the supply, sufficiency and relevancy of outdoor recreation resources relative to where people live, access to transportation systems to get them there or safe walking routes. Consider, for example, an urban park that is cut off from a neighborhood by barriers such as railroad lines or freeways. Such a park serves little purpose to an under-served neighborhood if it can be seen but not safely accessed. Other obstacles might include inadequate access for the disabled, irrelevant features, inequitable distribution of park and recreation resources, inadequate or unsafe public parking, poor or inadequate roads and public access to trail corridors and beaches, and the lack of public transportation within and beyond city limits.

Environmental obstacles are those associated with the natural setting or the condition of outdoor recreation places. California has a tremendous variety of diverse natural settings that are viewed very differently by different segments of the population. Consider the range of settings for outdoor recreation opportunities - from vacant lots, grassy play fields and city parks to coastal beaches, alpine meadows, deserts and redwood forests. And, depending on one's background, preferences and level of experience, these settings can be exciting, interesting and inviting for some, yet represent a hostile environment of challenge and intimidation for others. Other environmental obstacles may be found in the presence of special status species, the threat of wild animals, steep topography, rough uneven terrain, noxious weeds, and the pollution of soil, water and air resources.

Demographic obstacles are those that deal with the distribution, density and characteristics of California's diverse and growing population, now at 34 million and growing by more than 600,000 people each year. The demographic make-up of California greatly influences the type, kind and location of park and outdoor recreation resources needed to meet today's needs and to address demand for the future. Outdoor recreation opportunities must be carefully planned to respond to the changing demographic patterns and the different use preferences by such a diverse population.

For example, today's elderly population is growing faster, living longer, have more disposable income and are more active than previous generations. Meeting their needs will require different facilities and services than customarily provided in the past. Twenty-five (25%) of all immigrants to the United States find their way to California, with the majority being Hispanic and Asian in origin of birth. Creating park and outdoor recreation opportunities that will be inviting to the new Californians will require rethinking service delivery strategies. Even within the same culture or ethnic group there may be significant differences that can challenge planning strategies for inclusion and balancing of diverse needs. The standards used in designing many of the current parks and outdoor recreation facilities in operation may no longer be applicable or relevant to Californians of today and future generations. The change in demographics should give pause to all park and recreation providers to assess the service population and to identify ways to make facilities more inviting and relevant to broader segments of the population who represent the growing numbers of non-traditional users.

Administrative related obstacles deal with the coordination and cooperation between park and recreation providers. For example, bringing parks, outdoor recreation opportunities and open space to under-served urban areas is usually very expensive and may require a trade-off in jobs, homes and revenues to local governments when considering park land vs. commercial development and housing. Working closely with neighboring jurisdictions and other agencies at all levels of the service spectrum may result in beneficial and cost-effective acquisitions and programs. Administratively, park and recreation providers are often slow to respond to changes in public attitude and providers also lack the capability to conduct appropriate research on emerging trends. Varying rules and regulations imposed by different agencies can be intimidating to the uninformed. Immigrants, representing the new demographic make-up of California may feel very differently about the presence of peace officers in outdoor recreation places than traditional users. And then there are the issues associated with fees and whether or not fees restrict the use by lower income residents.

Perceptions, real or imaginary, stand as potential obstacles and can prevent the use of an area based on reputation or rumor. Even a perceived act of discrimination can spread rapidly by word of mouth or through an ever-expanding Internet network thus creating a negative barrier for others to use an area, even if the incident was merely a perception or misunderstanding.

All park and recreation providers must face the task of removing obstacles for better access and for increasing the relevance to California's growing and changing population.

Key Points:

- Physical, environmental, demographic and administrative obstacles can impede participation in outdoor recreation opportunities.

- Many park and recreation facilities, programs and services lack relevance to, or don't meet the needs of, segments of California's rapidly changing population such as the elderly, youth, families, ethnic groups, new immigrants and persons with disabilities.
- Park and recreation providers are cautious when considering change to remove obstacles or when responding to public demand for new opportunities (responding to a fad vs. long-term trend.)
- Safety and security needs in many park and recreation areas are not keeping pace with the increase in use, user conflicts and inappropriate behaviors or illegal activities.
- Many park and recreation facilities, programs and services are inaccessible due to barriers such as distance, location, fees, environmental restrictions, security, access for disabled persons, traffic and the lack of public transportation.

Actions to Remedy Obstacles

1. Complete a statewide inventory of facilities by federal, state, county and city jurisdictions that will show the supply of facility attributes, distribution of outdoor recreation resources and potential barriers to park use. This information will be overlaid on the demographic profile for the same areas.
 - A. Establish an interagency work group of representatives from public agencies and community based service providers to make recommendations for inventory design criterion, level of detail, identification of off the self inventory management systems, and for maintaining and updating the inventory system. The goal is to accept an off the shelf system similar to the Facility Information Management (FIM) as used by the NRPA and to have a University complete and maintain the system for DPR.
 - B. Develop a scope of work for a university to complete and maintain the inventory.
 - C. Complete initial inventory.
 - D. Factor in inventory results as criteria in the Open Project Selection Process for grant applications.
2. Commission research on emerging trends affecting outdoor recreation activities and disseminate reports to park and recreation providers.
 - A. Convene a statewide group of interagency researchers and practitioners to discuss research needs in California and to establish research priorities.
 - B. Based on priorities, decide the what, where, when, and who will do the research and how will it be funded.

3. Develop recommended standards for parks and recreation in California; e.g., acres of neighborhood and community parks per 1000 population.
 - A. Research available standards such as those from NRPA, NPS, CPRS and other states.
 - B. Establish an advisory council (or similar work group) on developing park and recreation standards.
 - C. Survey cities and counties in California and elsewhere to determine what standards are currently in use.
 - D. Publish the preferred standards and disseminate to all park and recreation providers and post on DPR's website.
4. Conduct research/studies on access obstacles as a means of providing guidance to park and recreation providers (examples.)
 - A. The recreation needs and preferences based on the demographic segments of California's population.
 - B. The effect of fees as an impediment on limiting entry to public park and recreation areas.
 - C. The effect of recreation programs or after school recreation programs on reducing youth related crime.
 - D. Evaluate the effectiveness of pilot programs whereby schools, churches and businesses utilize public parklands for recreation activities as a means of introduction for non-traditional users.
 - E. Conduct studies on security/safety concerns to be replicated over time.
5. Evaluate the criteria for the Open Project Selection Process and revise to give priority consideration to competitive grant applications demonstrating the meeting of needs of under-served populations.
6. Commission a state level multicultural/multiracial task group for the purpose of reviewing standards, research findings, trends, barriers and to make recommendations to the respective agencies for implementation consideration.
7. Establish and fund inclusive camping programs at three selected sites to bring individuals with disabilities together for educational and recreational experiences. These three sites are to serve as models for inclusive camping and should include

family camp experiences, multi-generational programs and leader training on ADA, activity adaptation, safety and design. Educational support should come from recreation educators.

8. Recruit a Latino (or multicultural/racial) advocacy council of high profile sports, music and entertainers as a means to sell the benefits of parks and outdoor recreation to youth.