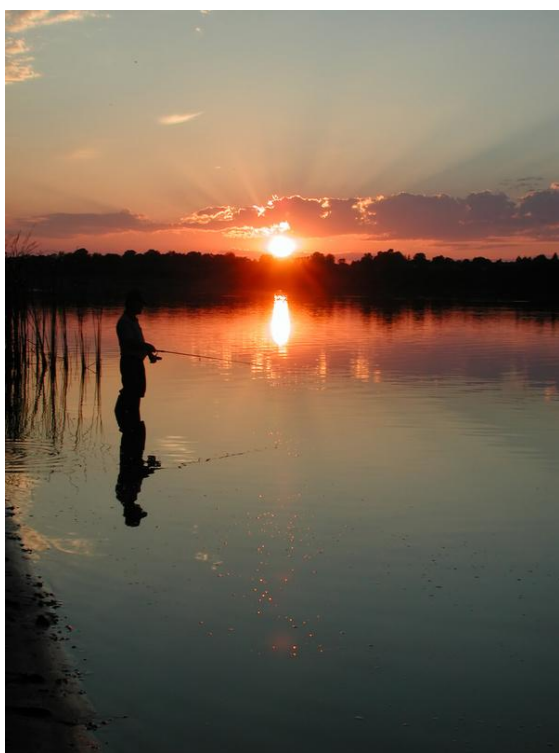


Why Parks and Trails Are Important

The Foundation for Preserving a Minnesota Legacy



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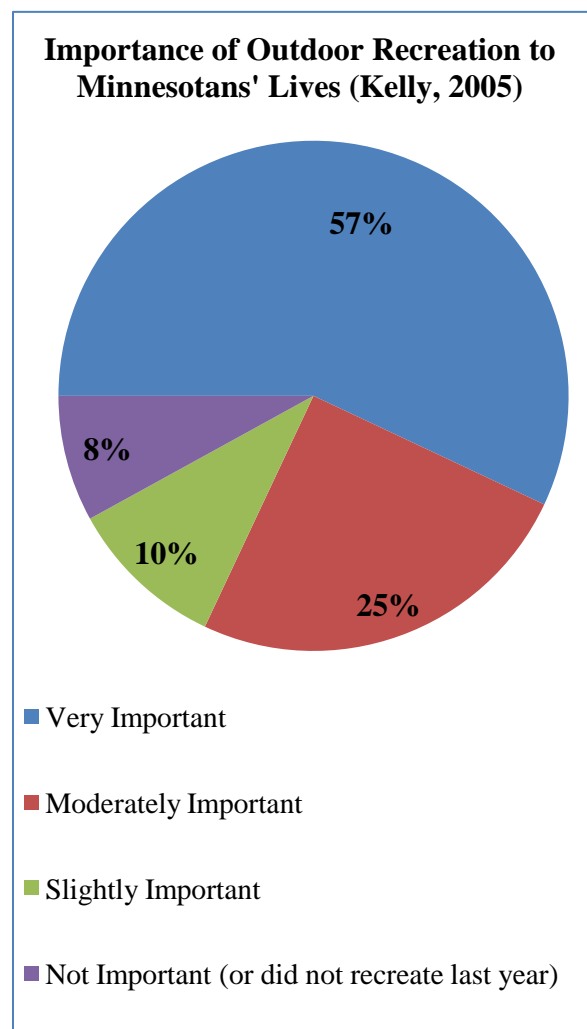
Why Parks and Trails Are Important

Every park and trail user knows the benefits of green space, but the benefits of our parks, trails, and green spaces extend far beyond users - they touch the lives of every person who lives and works in Minnesota. Improving our physical and psychological health, strengthening our communities, making our state and its cities more attractive places to live and work, protecting the environment - the benefits of parks and trails are comprehensive for Minnesota residents, communities, the economy and the environment.

Minnesotans Love Their Parks and Trails

A Statewide survey of Minnesota residents indicates that nearly 60 percent of Minnesotans feel that outdoor recreation is very important to their lives (Figure 1, Kelly, 2005). Minnesota ranks first among the states in the percent of residents who enjoy recreational boating, first in fishing, fourth in wildlife-watching and eighth in hunting (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2006; U.S. Coast Guard, 2009). Statewide, the importance of parks and trails to Minnesotans is further reflected in the passing of the Clean Water, Land and Legacy Amendment.

Statistics specific to metro area residents supplement statewide findings. In the Twin Cities, over 75 percent of residents visit their regional parks and trails at least once per year (Metropolitan Council, 2010a). Additionally, metro residents consistently recognize parks, trails and natural areas as the single most important attractive feature of the metro area at a 5-to-1 ratio to the next most attractive feature (Metropolitan Council, 2010b).



So Minnesotans like to recreate outdoors, and they place a high value on their parks and trails. Why? Simply put, it is because parks and trails provide benefits to all Minnesotans and Minnesotans know it.

The Benefits of Parks and Trails

The benefits of parks and trails are broad and pervasive. Parks and trails build strong families and communities, nourish our bodies and minds, attract economic development and growth and preserve and protect the natural environment. All of which helps enhance the quality of life for all Minnesotans.

Personal Benefits of Parks and Trails

Minnesotans, like the rest of the nation, enjoy the opportunities parks and trails provide for bonding with family and friends, being physically active, enjoying nature, and nourishing mental health and spiritual well-being (ARC, 2000; Kelly, 2008; Schneider, Schuweiler & Bipes, 2009). These benefits contribute to a high quality of life for Minnesota residents.

One of the most important benefits of state park visits is the opportunity to spend time with family and friends. Nine of ten state park users go to parks to spend time with family and nearly half have a child or teenager with them (Kelly, 2008). Likewise, statewide trail users like trails for the opportunity they offer for spending time with family and people who enjoy similar activities (Schneider, et. al., 2009). Similarly, in the regional parks system, the most common users fall under the “Socializer” category – people who enjoy the parks for opportunities to spend time with family and friends, be around other people, and experience the feeling of safety (Metropolitan Council, 1998).

Another key benefit of outdoor recreation is physical activity. Strong evidence shows that when people have access to parks, they are more likely to be regularly physically active (Task Force on Community Preventive Services, 2010). Regular physical activity has been shown to increase health and reduce

Benefits of outdoor recreation include, but are not limited to:

- Personal Benefits
 - quality of life
 - bonding with family and friends
 - physical activity
 - physical and mental health
 - enjoying nature
- Community Benefits
 - gathering place
 - community pride
 - sense of place
 - social capital
 - community trust
 - existence value
- Environmental Benefits
 - ecosystem services
 - environmental protection
 - sense of stewardship
 - environmental awareness
 - political / community involvement in environmental issues
- Economic Benefits
 - economic growth and jobs
 - tourism revenue
 - business acquisition and retention
 - increased property

the risk of a wide range of diseases, including heart disease, hypertension and diabetes. Physical activity also relieves symptoms of depression and anxiety, improves mood, and enhances psychological well-being (Minnesota Department of Health, 2002). People can participate in physical activity in a variety of

“Parks and trails provide an outlet for refreshing my spirit and keeping me fit and active”

*– Parks & Trails Legacy Plan
Public Workshop Participant*

ways, but many choose outdoor recreation as their preferred method of doing so. In fact, 90 percent of Americans mostly or strongly agree that outdoor recreation is the best way to be physically active (ARC, 2000). In Minnesota 9 of 10 state park and state non-motorized trail users and two-thirds of motorized trail users indicated that to be physically active was at least a moderately important reason for using a state park or trail in Minnesota (Kelly, 2008, Schneider et. al., 2009). High levels of physical activity go beyond just a personal benefit as healthy living also benefits the community through the potential for reduced healthcare costs.

Enjoying nature is another benefit of parks and trails. State park and trail users recreate outdoors so that they may be close to nature, enjoy natural scenery, or enjoy the smells and sounds of nature (Kelly, 2008, Schneider et. al., 2009). Likewise, for the regional parks system, the second most popular package of benefits was found with the “Nature Lovers” group – visitors seeking the opportunity to experience nature, experience solitude, and experience a unique place. These personal experiences add to stewardship practices which benefit the community and the environment in the long run.

Community Benefits of Parks and Trails

Parks and trails build communities by providing a place for people to gather, socialize and be around other people. Today, we realize that parks are more than recreation and visual assets to communities; they are valuable contributors to larger community policy objectives, such as public health, youth development, job opportunities, social and cultural exchange, and community building.

Parks play a special role for gathering and socialization. They have something to offer everyone from young children and teens, to families, adults and the elderly. They are more than places to recreate and relate to nature; parks also offer a multitude of opportunities to engage in arts and music. A park can be a community focal point, a symbol of its vitality and character, adding to its overall health, well-being and quality of life.

Community members near parks value them because they give members a feeling that their community is a special place to live and that it is a natural setting in which the community can take pride (Anderson, Davenport, Leahy & Stein, 2008). Residents near some of Minnesota's most visited state parks and Twin Cities Metro Area residents both indicate high community pride for the nearby parks, trails, and natural areas (Anderson, 2008). Residents consistently cite parks, trails and the natural environment as the area's most attractive features and 96 percent of residents also feel that the Twin Cities is a better or much better place to live than other metropolitan areas (Metropolitan Council, 2010a). Strong feelings about a park or trail help develop a sense of place and the building of social capital. Communities with high amounts of social capital tend to be more connected, more trusting of one another, and have a greater number of networks and groups that exist to enhance the quality of life for their community (Putnam, 2000).

“Being in a park or trail gives you a sense of community. You get to see your neighbors because you are in a shared space.”

*– Parks & Trails Legacy Plan
Public Workshop Participant*

Members of the greater community (those living beyond a close proximity to specific parks and trails) benefit simply by knowing a park or trail exists. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a long-standing example of existence value. Even though the vast majority of U.S. citizens will never visit the Refuge, they consistently support its preservation (Moore, 2002; Longley, 2005). Closer to home, the same story is true. More than 80 percent of Hennepin County residents believe regional parks are valuable even if they don't use them very much (Decision Resources, Ltd., 2008). Similarly, a subset of Minnesotans value parks and trails because they provide a sense of security that the natural environment will not be lost (Anderson et. al., 2008).

Environmental Benefits of Parks and Trails

Parks and trails provide ecosystem services, protect land from development, encourage a sense of stewardship, and stimulate political and social involvement around environmental issues.

One of the most important benefits of parks and trails is that they provide a place to preserve various natural and unique ecosystems (Anderson, 2008). By doing so, parks provide large natural spaces for plant and animal species while trails can double as greenway corridors which can help facilitate movement of animals and plants across their natural range. Parks and trails also support a variety of ecosystem services such as water and air purification, erosion control and carbon sequestration. Quality

habitat and biodiversity in turn provide personal benefits such as observing nature and being close to natural scenery.

“Care for what we have today so that future generations have a place to be outdoors in undeveloped areas.”

– Parks & Trails Legacy Plan Public Workshop Participant

Outdoor recreation opportunities facilitate low-impact travel such as walking and biking which reduces environmental stress. Increasing outdoor recreation opportunities within a reasonable walking or biking distance encourages people in Minnesota to choose non-motorized transportation options to reach those locations. Likewise, opportunities along commuting routes will encourage people to walk or bike to work and to other daily activities when possible.

Stewardship develops when people experience nature in meaningful ways, learn its benefits and begin to understand the complex symbiotic relationship that humans and nature share. Outdoor recreation is a fun, simple, and easily accessible way for many to learn about nature. Stewardship then arises as people realize hands-on the benefits of nature and how their small actions can make a difference. Stewardship also stimulates political and social involvement around environmental issues. Passage of the legacy amendment to the state’s constitution during a time of fiscal austerity is a clear example of how valuable having outdoor recreational opportunities is to the development of public policy aimed at protecting Minnesota’s natural environment for enjoyment by future generations.

Economic Benefits of Parks and Trails

From promoting job growth to offering inexpensive opportunities to have fun, be physically active and spend time with family, outdoor recreation contributes both directly and indirectly to the state economy and its citizen’s financial well-being.

Outdoor recreation areas attract local and non-local visitors who stimulate the local economy, contribute to local and state taxes and create jobs. In 2001, spending associated with visiting the Minnesota State Park System was \$218 million and supported nearly 3400 jobs (MN DNR, 2002). Similarly, 2008 trail users in Minnesota spent \$3.3 billion, contributed \$2.8 million in local taxes and accounted for 43,000 jobs (Venegas, 2009). Although economic impact from parks and trails is a small component of Gross State Product (GSP), it is often concentrated in smaller communities where the impact is larger. Many of Minnesota’s rural communities have come to rely on nature-based tourism as a significant portion of their economic health.

One of the most important ways that outdoor recreation promotes economic growth is through tourism. About 16 percent of state park spending can be attributed to non-Minnesotans (MN DNR, 2002). Considering that a large portion of tourism is interstate (e.g., travel from metro area to northeast) the impact of tourism can be considered even greater. Aside from the numerous economic benefits tourism provides, public recreation areas also offer a sustainable alternative to other land uses (i.e. development/extraction) that may offer large initial payouts but limit future socio-economic benefits.

“Trails are revenue generators for local and state economies.”

– Parks & Trails Legacy Plan Public Workshop Participant

Opportunities for outdoor recreation can attract new business and talented workers and help keep established businesses competitive. Small business owners have cited quality of life as a key reason for choosing a location (Crompton, Love & Moore, 2007). High quality of life makes it easier for businesses to attract and maintain a highly educated professional workforce and has been shown in at least one instance to be a bigger draw than a favorable business climate (Crompton, 2007a). Park, recreation, and open space amenities are among the most important components of quality of life. Furthermore, providing and promoting quality outdoor recreational opportunities can be a more sustainable way of attracting and retaining businesses than offering tax or other cash incentives. Companies that relocate to an area for tax incentives alone will likely continue seeking out other tax incentives and move on when they are able. High-quality outdoor recreational opportunities cannot be so easily replaced.

Another economic benefit of parks and trails are increased property values for homes nearby. Local and national studies have shown that the market values of properties near parks, trails, or open spaces frequently exceed those of comparable properties elsewhere (Anton, 2005; Crompton, 2007b). Increased property values also benefits communities by increasing real estate tax revenue.

Finally, outdoor recreation opportunities can potentially decrease medical expenses. In 2000 medical costs in Minnesota associated with physical inactivity were \$495 million (Minnesota Department of Health, 2002). Recreation opportunities have been shown to decrease these expenses. For example, a 1.0 percent increase in trail or off-trail related activity is associated with a 0.07 percent decrease in overweight (Rosenberger, Bergerson & Kline, 2009). Further, just one additional day of physical activity per week has been found to reduce medical charges by 4.7% (Pronk, Goodman, O’Connor & Martinson, 1999).

Benefits at Risk

Three key trends shape the future of parks and trails in Minnesota. Participation declines, climate change and landscape pressure from urbanization all put parks and trails benefits at risk. If we wish to continue to ensure a full suite of benefits from parks and trails to all Minnesotans, we need to think about how to adapt parks and trails management as these three trends are realized.

Benefits at Risk Due to Participation Declines

Minnesota is not escaping a broad trend—evident since the 1990s—of declining per-capita participation in nature-based outdoor recreation in the United States. This is a national trend that impacts national parks, national trails, state parks, state trails and other outdoor recreational facilities. It includes activities such as hunting, fishing, boating, wildlife watching, and wilderness use (Kelly, 2008). Although the decline in these activities in Minnesota is not as large as the national decline, it is still present. The primary driving factor behind this trend is a decline in involvement among young adults (ages 20–45) and their children. Today’s young adults and youth are not as engaged in traditional nature-based activities as older generations.

A number of secondary factors also contribute to the decline in participation rates for traditional nature-based outdoor recreation activities. As the population ages, participation in recreation activities generally declines. Similarly, as our state has become increasingly urban as well as increasingly racially/ethnically diverse, participation in traditional outdoor recreation activities has declined. Whether or not this decline is partially offset by a shift to other non-traditional outdoor activities is unclear, but it is plausible that the state’s demographic changes are also producing new users who enjoy outdoor recreation in different ways than traditional users.

In his 2005 book, “*Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*” Richard Louv documented how lifestyle changes over the past 30 years have had powerful and pervasive detrimental effects on children. The hypothesized causes that children no longer have adequate free time outdoors are: increasingly hectic schedules, growing dependence on electronic stimuli, and increased paranoia of child abduction. Children who do not recreate outdoors fail to realize the benefits of outdoor recreation.

Decreasing participation in outdoor recreation may contribute to poor health and associated high medical costs. In Minnesota 62.8% of adults are either overweight or obese (CDC, 2008a) and less than half meet recommended levels of physical activity (CDC, 2008b). Prevalence of obesity among children and adolescents in the United States quadrupled among 6 to 11 year olds and more than tripled among 12 to 19 year olds between 1971-1974 and 1999-2000 (CDC, 2008a). In 2000, medical costs in Minnesota associated with obesity were \$1.3 billion (Finkelstein, Fiebelkorn & Wang, 2004) and medical costs associated with physical inactivity were \$495 million (Minnesota Department of Health, 2002). High quality parks and trails can help mitigate these costs by providing inexpensive, safe and easy opportunities for physical activity while also improving the health and well-being of adults and children alike.

Declines in participation reduce the number of Minnesotans who receive the personal and community benefits of outdoor recreation that can be attained from parks and trails. These include physical activity, social and family bonding, sense of place, community pride and overall quality of life benefits that being active outdoors produces. Declines in participation also reduce positive environmental impacts gained from travel to parks and trails. Further, engaging with nature helps to produce a citizenry with an appreciation of the natural world that raises social and political support for resource conservation activities, support that may decrease as participation decreases.

Changing participation rates in outdoor recreation activities in Minnesota present some challenges and opportunities for park and trail managers as they position themselves to serve the state's citizenry in years to come. The challenges include:

- Maintaining public support for existing facilities that cater primarily to the traditional clientele while offering new and perhaps different opportunities to better serve the needs of the changing population.
- Ensuring that both groups of users (traditional and emerging) are able to attain the benefits that they seek from participation in outdoor recreational opportunities.
- Adjusting to the aging population, with a likely shift to less physically demanding activities.
- Understanding what would make parks and trails more attractive to youth and young adults.
- Identifying and better representing racially and ethnically diverse populations in the data used to develop trend projections and make decisions relative to acquisition and development of outdoor recreation programs.

Benefits at Risk Due to Urban Development

Minnesota will continue to develop and expand urban areas as the state adds population in the years to come. The state is projected to grow by more than 1 million people in the next 20 years, with over 80 percent of that growth focused in expanding urban areas (Minnesota Demographic Center, 2007). The loss of available green space to development reduces the benefit opportunities for a growing population.

The same land that is attractive for residential development (both permanent and seasonal) is attractive for outdoor recreation - hills with vistas, land adjacent to lakes and streams, forested land in urban areas. History has taught us that setting aside greenways, parks and open space as a connected network in areas of anticipated future residential development produces significant personal, community, environmental and economic benefits. As recent work on completion of regional trail corridors in developed suburbs has shown, it is socially difficult and considerably more expensive to develop parks and trails *after* development has occurred.

... look forward a century, to the time when the city has a population of a million, and think what will be their wants. They will have wealth enough to purchase all that money can buy, but all their wealth cannot purchase a lost opportunity ...”

Horace W.S. Cleveland
"Suggestions for a System of Parks and
Parkways for the City of Minneapolis"
June 2, 1883

Urban development adjacent to existing and planned parks and greenway corridors also poses a significant risk to the environmental benefits of parks - increased water flow and pollutant loading into lakes, streams and wetlands, direct pathways for invasive species, and forcing wildlife into the parks all create additional stress on existing populations. Encroachments such as unauthorized trails, mowing and illegal vegetation removal by residents adjacent to parks and open space also pose an ongoing concern.

Benefits at Risk Due to Climate Change

Climate change is predicted to have direct impacts on Minnesota's forests, grasslands, wetlands, lakes, and streams. Climate change can also intensify the negative effects of other factors influencing natural resources, such as the frequency and intensity of wildfires, the spread of invasive species, and the impact of fish and wildlife diseases (MN DNR, 2009).

Climate change may alter the full range of opportunities places offer and the benefits that accrue from those opportunities. Within 100 years, the recreational landscapes of Minnesota known today may change. Warming waters, drying wetlands and shifting forests across the state may mean that Minnesota resembles the landscape of Kansas or Nebraska (Figure 1, DNR 2009). What are currently successful recreational landscapes, parks along shallow lakes for example, may be undesirable within a few generations. Forested campgrounds may evolve into prairie campgrounds, with scattered shade and diminished attractiveness to potential campers. Fisheries may be significantly impacted as the waters warm and the oxygen levels decrease.

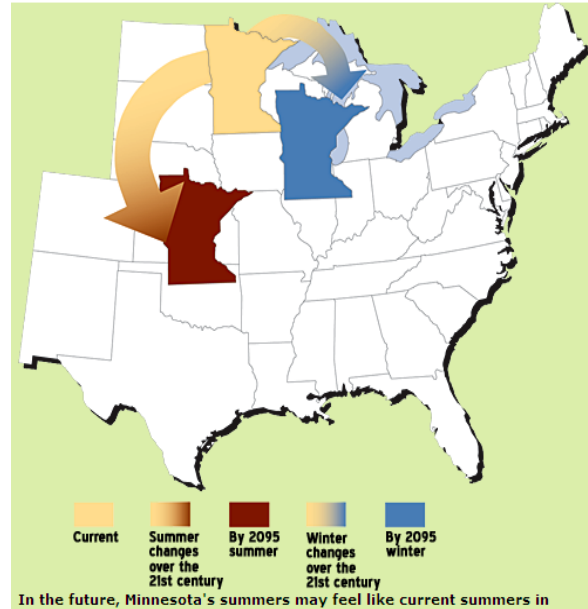


Figure 1. Predicted Landscape and Ecosystem Shifts Due to Climate Change, MN DNR 2009

Prospective climate change puts the environmental benefits of parks and trails at risk. At present, park and trail facilities protect high-quality natural settings, some of which represent natural communities from the time of European settlement. The natural communities developed under a climatic regime that, if modified, will stress the viability and quality of those communities. If climate change alters a facility's natural environment, it may also alter the benefits associated with the site, such as being in an undisturbed area or watershed protection.

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