



San Mateo County Parks – Visitor Use/Non-Use Study



A cursory Review of the Literature 2015-2016

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Introduction

Parks play an integral role in the community not only for leisure, but also for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. The **San Mateo County Parks Department** is interested in understanding the needs of their county's residents to help improve the facilities and programs that the parks department offers. To better serve the community, it is valuable to review previous research for essential information that could be of importance and relevance to the county. This review of literature will focus on a few key areas that will guide the efforts of the San Mateo County Parks Department to enhance their parks and services offered. The following topics will be discussed in this paper: visitor patterns and preferences, willingness to pay, race/culture trends, access, constraints and barriers, and health benefits of visiting parks (physical, mental, psychological).



Visitor Patterns and Preferences

Trends in Activities and Participation

Popular recreation activities have changed from what they used to be in the past. In a national study of outdoor recreation trends, Cordell (2012) found, in general, people are spending more time outdoors, and more often, within the last fifteen years. Rather than just participating in a couple of activities, there is relative popularity over a wide range of activities such as hiking, walking, running, motorized water activities, equestrian activities, and biking. The results also indicated that photography and nature-based activities have replaced in popularity more traditional outdoor activities like fishing and hunting. Based on these findings, Cordell (2012) suggested accommodating more nature-based activities like photography at overnight and day-use sites.

The **California State Parks Department (CSP)** conducted a Survey on Public Opinions and Attitudes on outdoor recreation in 2012 (published in 2014, cited in the California Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, 2015). This survey included responses from 5,421 adults and 410 young people, ranging in ages 12-17. Over a twelve month span, 70% of Californians surveyed participated in

picnicking and 63% enjoyed walking. Those under the age of 18 preferred to play and participate in sports; over 25% of youth reported soccer or swimming as their favorite outdoor activity (CSP, 2014). The youth also expressed that they would like to engage in new activities, like horseback riding and camping, more often.

There are also differences in why people choose to participate in certain activities (e.g., motivation). In the CSP Opinions and Attitudes report, 80% of the adult participants agreed that recreation programs aid in enhancing their health and overall well-being. Even the youth recognized that spending time outside is a positive way of dealing with stress from their daily lives. Participants also reported the most frequent reasons to participate in their favorite recreation activity were to relax, have fun, be with family and friends, and appreciate scenic beauty. Wilderness type facilities, where they can recreate near lakes or hike on single-use trails, were also important to participants. Many Californians agreed that more outdoor education and environmental programs are needed at their local parks.



Willingness to Pay

It is important to understand the types of programs and facilities park users are more likely to pay for and feel like their money is well-spent. According to the 2014 CSP Opinions and Attitudes report, more than 60% of the respondents agreed that it was most important to protect natural and historic resources, as well as clean up pollution and maintain park and recreation areas. Most of those who responded to the survey strongly agreed that fees should be spent on the area that the money was collected at (rather than dispersed amongst the entire park system) to address these concerns (CSP, 2014).

Respondents were willing to pay more for activities that needed to use a facility or if the activity required special equipment or skills. For example, they were more willing to pay to use a picnic area or campsite, or pay for more advanced activities like sailing and horseback riding. Studies show that out of all of the recreational activities reported, respondents were more willing to pay between \$11 to \$50 to camp and picnic over other activities. People were less willing to pay for activities, such as walking or day hiking, that do not require the use of equipment or facilities (CSP, 2014).

Race and Culture Trends

Recent research has focused on marginalized ethnic groups and their recreation patterns and preferences. Diverse social groups choose different recreation activities to participate in depending on their needs and interests. In California, it is well recognized that there is a large Hispanic/Latino population which is continuously expanding, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area. According to the “Outdoor Recreation in California’s Regions” report by the California’s State Park System (2013), the Hispanic population made up about one-quarter of the entire Bay Area population in 2010 and continues to grow. This population uses recreational sites for reasons that differ from other ethnic groups.

Chavez conducted multiple studies in Los Angeles with the Hispanic population regarding their outdoor recreational use and needs (Chavez, 2001, 2003; Chavez & Olson, 2009). Throughout these studies, as commonly known today, Chavez found there was a strong emphasis for spending time with family amongst this population. This could mean that there was usually a larger sized group (ranging from 8 to 15 users) at particular outdoor recreation sites at any given time.



On average, Hispanics could spend 6-10 hours at a site, which meant low turnover (Chavez & Olson, 2009). Since spending time with family was an important activity, Hispanics frequently visited parks more often than other social groups (Chavez & Olson, 2009; CSP, 2014). Jogging, running, and playing sports were also reported to be important activities to Hispanics, especially the youth (CSP, 2014). Facilities with swimming pools, playgrounds, ball courts, and sports fields were used more by Hispanics than compared to other ethnic groups in California (CSP, 2014).

The Asian American community is also rapidly growing in California, especially in the Bay Area. In the most recent CSP Opinions and Attitudes survey (2014), over 15% of responses from the greater San Francisco Bay Area region were comprised of Asians Americans, which was the highest percentage of any Californian region. This population is expected to continue to increase in the Bay Area by the year 2060 (CSP, 2013). In the past, research has focused more heavily on differences in Black-White or Hispanic participation, though attention is beginning to shift to look at other ethnic groups and their recreation preferences. A few studies have looked at the recreation preferences of the Asian American population in comparison to those of Whites, African Americans, and Hispanics. According to Gobster (2002), Asian Americans were more likely to engage in passive social-oriented activities, such as picnicking. Preference for these types of activities could be contributed to the collectivist culture represented in Asian countries, as reported by Cordell and others (2002).

There were also differences in the preferences of subgroups of the Asian population. In a study conducted by Winter and colleagues (2004), the recreation attitudes and behaviors of four Asian American subgroups living in the San Francisco Bay Area were examined: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino. The results found that recreation participation differed significantly by subgroup depending on education, income, and gender, indicating a need to explore the preferences of each subgroup individually. The study also found that Asian Americans rely heavily on ethnic media and written materials in Asian languages for information, though this may be, in part, due to a great proportion of the participants being foreign born.

Furthermore, Roberts and Chitewere (2011) conducted a focus group study with nearly 100 people of color, across ethnic lines, living in the Bay Area to provide indicators of constraints to park use. While identifying physical, mental and spiritual benefits of access to nature in parks, many participants expressed frustration with limited physical access, subtle racism, and general exclusion from the culture of parks, as reasons why they avoid these public spaces. Findings suggest key considerations for agency actions include outreach through more intentional communication strategies, multilingual signage, responding to complaints of discrimination, implementing activity suggestions, and more representative hiring.



Park Access: Constraints and Barriers

Due to the growth of diversity within California, there is a great deal of focus on how to increase park access for these populations. First, park agencies must understand the perceived constraints and barriers of these ethnic groups, as well as other members of the community. Green and colleagues (2010) used data from the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE) to examine whether different social groups (e.g. Hispanics, low-income, women, immigrants) were more likely than others to feel limited in participating in outdoor recreation. The findings clearly indicated that certain portions of our society feel more restricted than others (Green, et. al., 2010). The most common constraints reported were *inadequate time and/or transportation, can't understand the language, and safety problems*.

For immigrants, not understanding the language of the signage constrained them the most out of any other barriers. Interestingly, many of the constraints in the study were not as important to the immigrant participants. This was assumed to be due to the long hours normally worked by this group, so their leisure time was confined to their ethnic communities (Green, et. al., 2010). Asian Americans felt more constrained due to not being able to find sufficient information about the facilities, as well as “feeling unwelcome”. Age was also a significant factor amongst all social groups. With increased age, constraints such as physical limitations and safety were highlighted, though other constraints like time and money were reduced.

In the Opinions and Attitudes survey, it was reported that 72% of Californians walk to the place they visit the most often for recreation; the rest either drive, bike, or use public transit (CSP, 2014). Therefore, it is important to listen to and address the needs of the immediate communities surrounding parks. Respondents to the survey also reported being willing to drive between 11 and 60 minutes to a particular recreation area.

Themes generated from the Golden Gate National Recreation Area ethnic minority focus groups (Roberts



& Chitewere, 2011) also included barriers associated with basic knowledge of parks, representation of park management, lack of communication, perceived or real discrimination (e.g., non-verbal cues), and accessibility issues. “Not every ethnic group experiences national parks the same way, nor do members of an ethnic group use parks for the same purpose. Rather, a common thread that ran through each group was that there were constraints to using parks in ways that were culturally appropriate” (p. 361) such as language issues and lack or representation of the park workforce. Additionally, simply not knowing where to go or what to do is a constraint limiting access. For example, all ethnic groups expressed frustration with the lack of information about parks (e.g., location, history) and park activities in their communities, as well as requesting information about parks to be promoted in various sources of ethnic media (Roberts & Chitewere, 2011).

The youth of California also experience barriers similar to adults, such as being too busy due to school or extracurricular activities. Some of the youth reported lack of interest in the outdoors; 69% of those surveyed preferred to be on the Internet (CSP, 2014). Being able to access programs and facilities that are nearby, or easy to get to, were identified by California youth as one of the best solutions to get them to use parks more often (CSP, 2014). Almost 20% of youth identified that providing areas specifically made for children their age would encourage them to participate more often in recreation.

Health and Park Use



Physical Health

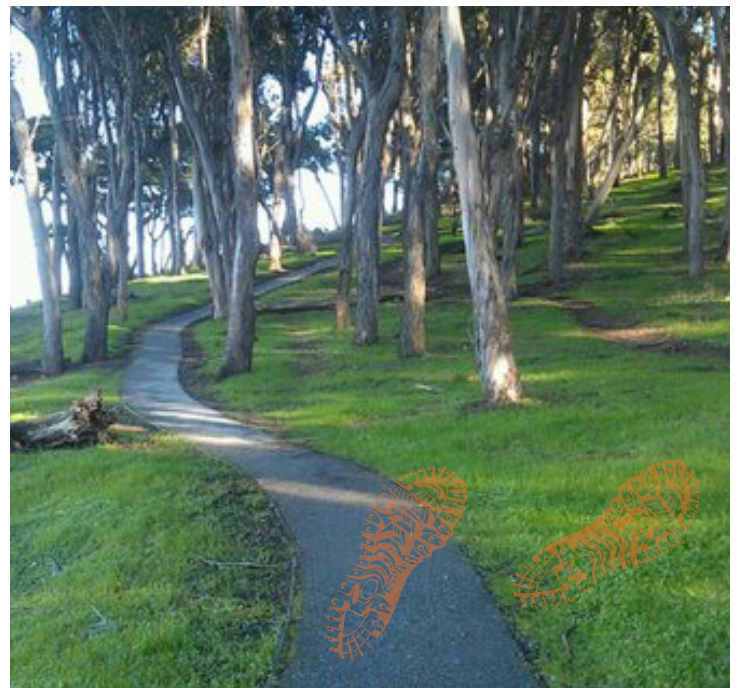
As obesity rates increase within the United States, one cannot overlook the importance parks and play in helping to combat these health challenges. In particular, low-income areas heavily rely on neighborhood parks for exercise and other physical activities. In a study of 8 local parks within minority communities of Los Angeles, Cohen and others (2007) found that most people in those communities who exercised did so at their local parks. The findings also indicated that participation increased with the availability of more supervised, structured activities or events. This study suggested that emphasis should be placed on providing more special events that encourage physical activity in the parks. In the 2014 CA Opinions and Attitudes report, most respondents agreed that recreation programs help to improve the health of park users. One of the most important reasons respondents indicated for engaging in recreation activities was “to keep fit and healthy” (CSP, 2014).

In a more recent study by Shanahan and colleagues (2015), it was found that the likelihood a person will exhibit positive health behaviors, such as commencing physical activity on a regular basis, was influenced by an environment that was enhanced by natural elements. These findings suggest that residents of disadvantaged and urban neighborhoods with less accessibility to parks may not have the same motivations to undertake physical activity, therefore, exposing themselves to increased risk of poor mental and physical health. In order to connect people with their neighborhood spaces, it will require efforts that engage the community in innovative ways (Shanahan, et. al., 2015).

Mental Health

There is a wide variety of research available regarding the psychological benefits of parks and related activities. Not only do parks offer opportunities for rejuvenation, connecting with others, and social integration (Peschardt, Schipperijn, & Stogsdotter, 2012; Sugiyama et al., 2010), parks also promote collaboration among neighbors and community members (Peters, Elands, & Buijs, 2010).

In a study by Gomez, Baur, Hill, and Georgiev (2015), the relationship between parks and a psychological sense of community was examined using survey data collected in Virginia. In general, the results of the study found that using the parks in some capacity had a positive influence on psychological sense of community over not using the parks at all. Park users reported a higher sense of membership to their neighborhood, as well as a higher sense of safety, over non-park users (Gomez, Baur, Hill, & Georgiev, 2015). By providing non-park users with information regarding the benefits and amenities of parks in their neighborhood, such as greater overall psychological sense of community, it is possible that use and a sense of membership will increase as well.



Conclusions

While the reasons that people use parks may have changed over time, what is constant is the importance of parks to the community. Not only do parks serve as a place for recreation and leisure, parks also provide a place to create lasting memories with family and friends. With the population in the San Francisco Bay Area changing rapidly, it would be beneficial to learn more about the different cultures residing in the area to ensure that the parks will serve every person within the community. Having a staff that is knowledgeable and can interact comfortably with many cultures will be a worthy asset to the organization, especially the different subgroups of the Asian American/Pacific Islander population, as well as the Hispanic population, which are expected to increase the most in the Bay Area over the next fifty years (CSP, 2013). By increasing cultural competence and cultural humility, understanding these cultures, etc., vital information including how best to communicate with varying populations as well as barriers preventing more visitation, will be uncovered.

Another important population not to overlook is the Bay Area youth. The future of parks relies on the youth's interest and desire to use these facilities. The parks department must continue seeking new ways to compete with the Internet in order to win over the youth's time and attention. By implementing increased use of social media and online interactive

activities that will grab the attention of children and teens, the parks can stay readily in the minds of the youth. It would be valuable to provide a variety of programs geared towards the youth and their needs, as well as make these programs easily accessible by either providing transportation to the event or hosting the program closer to the communities it serves.

One benefit of parks that everyone can enjoy is improved health, both physical and mental. Many adult park users are already aware of these benefits and are motivated to use the parks for these reasons. The focus of health-driven programs should be on increasing the amount of youth involved with these programs so they can develop a healthy lifestyle early on.

Here in the San Francisco Bay Area, there are countless opportunities for recreation and to enjoy nature that can be overshadowed by the many diversions of city life. Although city parks are enjoyed and used, people continue to seek nature-based experiences outside urban boundaries such as what county parks nearby have to offer. The parks can remain relevant by staying current with social media and creating attractive activities/programs rather than just a simple hike or jog. Many are just looking for an experience that they can look back on with pride and satisfaction, and to remember all the laughter and smiles taking place!



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