

Document 1

Medical Officer of Health's submission in response to the Government of Ontario's Healthy Parks Healthy People (HPHP) Consultation

1. Are you or your organization currently promoting nature as good for human health?

OPH, has in the past and, continues to use several health promotion strategies to promote nature as a source of human health benefits. Examples include:

Partnerships & Collaboration

Working in partnership with municipal partners such as Recreation, Culture and Facilities Services to improve residents' awareness of outdoor recreational opportunities and community partners like the Canadian Public Health Association to pilot resources & promote the positive impact of unstructured outdoor play on child health and academic success.

The City of Ottawa provides year-round opportunities for access to outdoor recreation. For example, the City owns and operates more than 650 outdoor sports fields, over 250 outdoor rinks, cross country ski trails, sledding hills, trail and pathway networks.

The City of Ottawa Recreation Culture and Facility Services Recreation Guides provide a way for all residents to easily access recreation programs such as the "I Love to Ski" and walking clubs programs, which increases access to parks for people with low income.

Health Communication & Public Education

Providing health communications to the public about the benefits of nature exposure on mental & physical health and overall wellness across the lifespan as well as public education, through social media and programs, on the potential risks associated with nature exposure such as tick bites and noxious plants.

Healthy Public Policy

Advancing healthy public policy with City partners in Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development Department such as the new City of Ottawa Official Plan and the Significant Woodlands Policy.

2. How do you know if what you are doing to promote nature and health is successful?

Ottawa Public Health undertakes evaluation activities on its programs and services. Evaluation information collected is continuously used to improve the reach and quality of our services to ensure our services are relevant and meaningful to our community.

There is support for new open space studies, policies and by laws such as: the Municipal tree and natural area Protection By Law,^{xii} Recreation Facility Infrastructure Standards and Strategy,^{xiii} Action Plan for Recreation and Culture in the Downtown Core,^{xiv} the Urban Forest Management Plan,^{xv} National Capital Urban Canopy Project,^{xvi} and the Park Manual.^{xvii}

City of Ottawa Park Manual incorporates nature through standards for parks that include size, location, service area and amenities. All park typologies provide a variety of active and passive recreational opportunities. Parks have a canopy cover target of 30% cover at maturity and a naturalization target of 20%. The Park manual recommends parks are linked and co-located with the greenspace network, opens pace areas and active transportation routes. These standards are one opportunity to ensure access to urban greenspace and provide a quantitative measure to track progress.

3. What are the barriers to using nature in health promotion and advocacy?

Perceptions of nature

For those that have had little or no previous exposure to nature (e.g. some urban youth, some new Canadians), the outdoors can be perceived as a frightening placeⁱ. Warnings about the dangers of, for example, sun exposure, Lyme disease, wild parsnip, wildlife all partnered with a general fear of the unknown, create a view of nature as unsafe and full of risk to someⁱⁱ.

As a result of this view that being outdoors in nature is a high-risk activity, individuals may perceive that they lack the skills to partake in outdoor activities. The HPHP movement may be well-positioned to change individuals' perceptions about nature through public education about the benefits and risks of nature exposure and the enhanced promotion and expansion of existing Ontario Parks programs such as Learn to Camp programs and guided activities.

Proliferation of screen-based technology into daily life

Screen-based technology offers opportunities to learn, communicate and for recreation. In the last decade, sedentary screen-based activities have become common place with 75% of Canadian children getting more than the recommended amount of screen-time dailyⁱⁱⁱ. Indoor, screen-based activities are replacing time spent in nature across the

lifespan. Many health experts are calling for efforts to move the population away from excessive screen time and to normalize time spent outdoors^{iv}.

In addition, recreation has shifted from a “free play” environment to more programmed and structured activity; this change minimizes unscheduled use of parks.^{xviii}

Social Determinants of Health

Residents who are at risk of the poorest health outcomes may not have equitable opportunities for nature exposure and are therefore are not able to derive the health benefits^v. Research has found that residents in low-income neighbourhoods are less likely than those in more advantaged neighbourhoods to have access to parks and pathways and use green spaces yet, the positive impacts of nature exposure are more pronounced in residents of these neighbourhoods^{vi}. Additionally, lower income neighbourhoods have been found to have less overall green space and green space that is of less quality than in other neighbourhoods.

The quality of the green space impacts who, when and how often that space is used. Green spaces that are not well-maintained or that are of low-quality are underused and therefore do not contribute to population health^{vii}, ^{viii}.

Definition of Nature

The definition of nature, parks, greenspace, open space, are not clearly defined and can have different meanings depending on the user, scale and context. This lack of clarity makes quantification of benefits difficult.

4. What tools or resources would make it easier for you to promote nature as good for human health?

Policies and plans that protect and expand green space across the province

The protection of our natural environment is governed by multiple laws, regulation and policies from across municipal, provincial and federal jurisdictions^{ix}. The Government of Ontario’s *Preserving and Protecting our Environment for Future Generations: A Made-in-Ontario Environment Plan* commits to actions to conserve and protect green space in the province. The successful implementation of this plan is key to supporting our rich natural environment so that it can be accessed for generations to come.

One local example is how municipal policies can also support and strengthen local access to green spaces. The City of Ottawa is currently reviewing its [Official Plan](#). As part of this review, the City of Ottawa has proposed new policy directions that move to

embed public health, climate and energy resiliency into its next Official Plan. This includes plans for protecting and growing the urban tree canopy and land use planning that incorporates adequate natural elements to reduce exposure to air pollution, mitigate urban heat islands, and to promote active lifestyles.

No fee/low fee for green space access

Research has shown that green space user fees and transportation and equipment costs are barriers to accessing recreational opportunities, especially for those who are already economically disadvantaged^{x, xi}. Policy changes could ensure the cost of accessing Ontario Parks is within reach of all Ontarians. Specifically, fees could be set so that financial status is not a determining factor in who and who does not get to participate in nature-based activities.

On Healthy Parks Healthy People Day (July 17, 2020), Ontario Parks currently offers free day-use entry to all Ontario Parks for everyone. Expanding this concept to allow for additional no-fee or low-fee opportunities for residents of Ontario to access Ontario Parks would reduce financial barriers experienced by some. Ontario Parks could examine the feasibility of adopting the Parks Canada model that allows for free day use access to Parks Canada locations for all children and youth 17 years of age and under.

Geospatial mapping

In order to facilitate public access to green spaces, the province could support the provision of web based geospatial analysis to identify assets and deficits around the provision of nature e.g. each green space identifies its accessibility level, active transportation and transit connections and facilities. This would support both promoting public awareness of locations and access, and enabling local healthy public policy for protection and promotion of green infrastructure and natural spaces.

5. Are there opportunities to incorporate nature into the work you do?

Ottawa Public Health currently promotes nature in our work and will continue to do so. There are opportunities to work with stakeholders to facilitate more programming in nature.

6. Who do you believe are the key partners required to make health and nature programs successful?

- Public Health Units
- Conservation agencies
- Parks agencies

- Schools & child care settings
- Recreation programming providers
- Indigenous Peoples
- Health care professionals
- Parents

7. What could park organizations, such as Ontario Parks, do to position nature as a tool for improving human health?

- Decrease barriers to green space access. Make it easier for people to get outdoors by decreasing barriers they face to accessing Ontario Parks & other green spaces (i.e. fees structures, equipment loaning programs, low cost transportation, etc.).
- Engage the health care sector. Onboard family physicians and other health care practitioners to promote nature exposure as a health enhancer with their patients.
- Combat negative perceptions or fears about nature. Continue to offer and consider expanding current programming at Ontario Parks aimed at introducing people to nature & that provide skill-building opportunities (i.e. learn to camp programs, guided hikes, and programs offered by park naturalists).
- Support children's exposure to nature early on. Look to child care settings and schools to encourage students to spend time outdoors during recess and other times throughout the day (i.e. during physical education).
- Go local. Support municipalities & local public health units in their efforts to create healthy public policies that facilitate nature exposure across all demographics.

8. What could Ontario Parks do to work with you and other health advocacy groups to promote the link between health and nature?

Be a connector. Action from a variety of sectors such as public health, land-use planning and conservation authorities will be required to shift individual behaviours and to change our built environment to facilitate the populations' connection with, and exposure to, nature on a regular basis. Ontario Parks could serve as a connector and leader in bringing partners together to work collaboratively.

Be a voice. Ontario Parks could work collaboratively with public health units and other partners on a comprehensive health communications strategy related to

nature. A comprehensive communications strategy could include multiple messages that impact nature exposure. These might include the health benefits of nature exposure, messaging to address fears/myths about nature, practical information about local risks in the outdoors such as tick bites, poison ivy exposure, wildlife etc.

Leverage work that is already being done. Public health units have expertise in developing and delivering locally relevant messaging & programs that will resonate with their communities and have connections with local partners. As such, public health units across the province are well positioned to further the mandate of the HPHP initiative by leveraging existing public health strategies and partnerships.

Ontario Parks could provide peer-reviewed quantitative research on the type of outdoor space that provides the most benefit to human health as support for developing this type of space as part of a municipalities Park Plan.

9. Are you interested in engaging further with Ontario Parks on Healthy Parks Healthy People?

Yes.

ⁱ Canadian Parks Council. (2014). Connecting Canadians with Nature: An investment in the well-being of our citizens.

ⁱⁱ Alled D. (2011). Nature Deficit disorder: Causes and Consequences.

ⁱⁱⁱ Government of Ontario. (2019) Consultation: Healthy Parks Healthy People. Available from: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/consultation-healthy-parks-healthy-people>

^{iv} MOHLTC. (2014). HKCC Run. Jump. Play. Every Day! Background and Evidence.

^v The health benefits of the outdoors: A systematic review and meta analysis of greenspace exposure and health outcomes. *Environmental Research*, (166).

^{vi} Toronto Public Health. (2015). Green City: Why nature matters to health – An Evidence Review. Toronto, Ontario.

^{vii} Carleson SA, Brooks JD, Brown DR, Buchner DM. (2010). Racial / Ethnic difference in perceived access. Environmental barriers and use of community parks. *Preventing Chronic Disease in Public Health: Public Health Research, Practice and Policy*, (7) 3.

^{viii} Toronto Public Health. (2015). Green City: Why nature matters to health – An Evidence Review.

^{ix} City of Ottawa. (2019). 5 Big Moves Overview.

^x Parks and Recreation Ontario. (2006). Access for all. Available : <https://www.prontario.org/public/policy/RecAccessPolicyFinal.pdf>

^{xi} Alberta Parks. (2012). Everyone Belongs Outside. Available: <https://www.albertaparks.ca/media/5143694/everyone-belongs-outside.pdf>

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- ^{xii} City of Ottawa. (2006). Municipal Trees and Natural Areas Protection (By-law No. 2006-279). Available: <https://ottawa.ca/en/living-ottawa/laws-licences-and-permits/laws/law-z/municipal-trees-and-natural-areas-protection-law-no-2006-279>
- ^{xiii} City of Ottawa. (2019). Recreation Facility Infrastructure Standards and Strategy. Available: <https://engage.ottawa.ca/recreation-facility-infrastructure-standards>
- ^{xiv} City of Ottawa. (2019). Action Plan for Recreation and Culture in the Downtown Core. Available: <https://engage.ottawa.ca/downtown-core-programming-plan>
- ^{xv} City of Ottawa. (2017). Putting Down Roots for the Future City of Ottawa: Urban Forest Management Plan 2018-2037. Available: <https://ottawa.ca/en/living-ottawa/environment/trees-plants-and-forests/ottawas-urban-forest-management-plan>
- ^{xvi} National Capital Commission (2019). National Capital Urban Canopy Project. Available: <https://ncc-ccn.gc.ca/news/national-capital-regions-new-tree-canopy-study-mapping-the-tree-canopy-understanding-green-infrastructure>
- ^{xvii} City of Ottawa. (2017). Park Development Manual. Available: https://documents.ottawa.ca/sites/documents/files/documents/park_development_manual_en.pdf
- ^{xviii} Participaction. (2018). Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth. Available: <https://www.participaction.com/en-ca/resources/report-card>