Research: Connecting Youth with the Regional Park System

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Community Development Committee
“Going outside can reinvigorate how you see things. Parks are always important. Because we are human, we are connected with nature. We are grounded in the earth. Being out in parks is a way of being human”

- Parent, Outdoor Latino Minnesota
Research questions

What are obstacles to youth access?
What does a great day in the park look like?
What advice/assets do youth have as they connect with the outdoors?
How can park agencies build connections to encourage access?

Increasing Youth Access to Parks & Trails
Research Process
Three step process

Team Formation

• Youth serving organizations as micro-consultants (paid stipend)
• Team assembled: Researchers (hired) and park agency staff (volunteered from open call to all agencies)

Designing experience/Generating data
Youth-park connection

Data analysis

"Thank you for bringing this team to work with our youth. Because you have a research team that is mostly people of color, the kids can see that they as young people of color belong in the park, that parks are not just for white people, that working in the outdoors is something they could do."
– Urban Roots Staff Member
Three step process

Team Formation

Designing experience/Generating data
Youth-park connection

• Pre-experience meetings to learn motivations, needs, capacities. (Data generated: Fieldnotes and in-park design)
• Five half or full day in-park experience: Fieldnotes and photos of experience, focus groups with supportive adults

Data analysis

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Three step process

Team Formation

Designing experience/Generating data
Youth-park connection

Data analysis
• Post-park analysis (validity conversation) with youth organizations and research team
• Research team coding of fieldnotes, interview transcripts, photos, video. Create end products (in process)

“Thank you for bringing this team to work with our youth. Because you have a research team that is mostly people of color, the kids can see that they as young people of color belong in the park, that parks are not just for white people, that working in the outdoors is something they could do.”
– Urban Roots Staff Member
## Partnerships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth Serving Organization*</th>
<th>Implementing Agency</th>
<th>Park Visited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian Media Access, St. Paul</td>
<td>Ramsey County</td>
<td>Battle Creek Regional Park</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization of Liberians in Minnesota, Brooklyn Park</td>
<td>Three Rivers Park District</td>
<td>Elm Creek Park Reserve (Eastman Nature Center)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outdoor Latino Minnesota, Great Twin Cities</td>
<td>Dakota County</td>
<td>Spring Lake Park Reserve (Master Plan)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scout Troop 100, Greater Twin Cities**</td>
<td>Washington County</td>
<td>St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban Roots, St. Paul</td>
<td>Washington County</td>
<td>Pine Point Regional Park (Master Plan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Rivers Park District Teen Council (Validity-conversation only)</td>
<td>Three Rivers Park District</td>
<td>Research team visited Teen Council</td>
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</tbody>
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*Organizations included Hmong, Liberian, Latinx, African American, Asian communities

**Including consulting researcher Chaoching Vang
How we analyzed the data

Criteria to choose finding

1. Observed in the park
2. Talked about by youth
3. "Sticky"-remembered later
4. Said in Multiple Groups

Additional Considerations
- Overcomes obstacles
- Adults mention value
Obstacles
Obstacles related to park experience

Safety
• Youth described that “Outdoors can be ‘unpredictable’ which can be ‘safe and unsafe’... concerns are ‘bad weather,’ ‘animals can come out’, and ‘bad people’”

Opportunity
• “I wanna get over my fear of water because I don’t know how to swim. But I want to learn how to swim... I’m scared of the water because I don’t know how to swim, and it stops me from going on a boat. But I want to know”

Racism
• “We’re minorities, we’re people of color. Depending where you go (in the outdoors), it can be tense. For example, if you’re out west, you get questions about things a lot. In areas where it’s predominantly white, in less diverse communities. So I, as a parent, that’s always in the forefront of my mind.”
Obstacles related to social context

Awareness
• “This park was not even on the radar. I just didn’t know, and it’s in my neighborhood.
• “With the regional parks, they’re not as well known... If they don’t know anything about the regional parks, they can’t get started”

Time constraints
• “My parents are very busy, and they are tired when they are home so they do not want to go outside.”
• “My younger son wants to go. He always says, ‘let’s go out, let’s play soccer, let’s go to the park. But my older girl is always running to get things done, and she doesn’t have time.”

Economic
• Estimated 40% of youth live in households with cost-barriers
• “Five dollars is a lot of money. That is my gas money.”
• Transportation – “Yes it would be easy, but not financially... Sometimes families have to conserve the gas that they use to do fun things because they have to use that gas to get other places and using to go to the park would be a waste of money.”
• No bus access to parks.
Findings: What Connects Youth and The Park System?
1. Investment in Staff and Programming

- Excellent staffing addresses obstacles.
- Youth enjoyed learning: Natural world, new skills, cultural history
- Best programming included blended time for instruction and informal exploration/play
2. Desired Amenities & Activities

• Teach groups to camp
• Photography
• Winter sports
• Hanging out, survival skills, arts-based activities
• Youth value connecting with their own community in nature
• Scheduling and elimination of fees
3. All Youth Have Relevant Prior Experience

- What assumptions guide engagement with new youth users?

- All users approach their park visit using prior experience: personal, family, community, culture.

- Stories from elders, family trips outdoors, school trips, prior events, school learning.

- How can implementing agency and Council staff connect?
Photos Taken by OLM Youth
Outputs/Deliverables

- Activity & Coloring Book
- Detailed Report/Actionable Summary
- Engagement Toolbox
- Presentations for various audiences
- Launch of Youth and Parks webpage
Why does this Research Matter?

• “By 2040, 39% of the population will be people of color, compared to 24% in 2010. The share of people of color increases among younger age groups; 53% of residents younger than age 18 will be people of color in 2040.”

• “Involvement in nature-based outdoor recreation among young adults and their children has decreased since the 1990s.”
Council Recommendations

1. Use Council funding to support equity-focused continued connection between programming and planning.

2. Continued research with underserved youth: African American, Indigenous, disabled, and rural youth, youth experiencing homelessness or poverty.

3. Sustained research, programming and engagement efforts by the Council to connect youth with the outdoors.
Implementing Agency Recommendations

4. Develop and adopt models for engaging with youth that value prior experience and cultural context.

5. Deeper investment in cultural inclusivity, subsidized programming and anti-racist parks policy development.

6. Agency partnerships with constituent-led youth serving organizations.
Questions / Discussion

What information from this report connects most directly with your priorities for the Council?

How can Council collaboration with agencies and budget investments support connecting youth and parks?

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