

Chapter 3 | Creating the Best Park Experience for Youth: Findings and Recommendations

Not surprisingly, quality staff and the natural beauty of parks combine to create for youth feelings of well-being. When staff prioritize responding to youth questions, ideas, and preferences, youth have great park experiences. This chapter focuses on four primary findings:

- Spending time in the outdoors generates feelings of health and well-being for youth.
- Programming and outreach staff remove obstacles to park visitation and enjoyment.
- Youth recommendations about activities and programming can create a great day in the park.

Time spent in parks generates feelings of well-being

I felt cool and adventurous being in the woods.

– Youth researcher, Celestial Paladins/Asian Media Access

Adolescents can experience significant levels of stress, depression, and anxiety.¹ Efforts to connect young people to spaces that create feelings of well-being are a public health investment.

Poor health conditions are prevented or reduced when young people have the opportunity to experience feelings such as mindfulness, positive emotions, life satisfaction, and lowered perceived stress.² During the in-park experience, youth participants expressed these aspects of well-being.

Time in nature-based activities can contribute to young people's emotional well-being. Awareness and attentiveness to the outdoor experience in the moment (mindfulness), life-satisfaction, positive emotions (such as feeling alert, enthusiastic, determined, interested, and inspired), calmness, and self-efficacy are all parts of emotional well-being.³ During their time spent in the regional parks, the youth expressed these emotional and mental states in both implicit and explicit ways.

Across all five park experiences, time in parks generated immediate, spontaneously expressed feelings of well-being while walking and talking in the park. Youth described openness and enjoyment of new adventures, as well as a sense of self-empowerment (self-efficacy)⁴, attentiveness to surroundings (mindfulness), having fun (life satisfaction), and relaxation (calm, lower perceived stress). Each of these health-generating emotions are noted in Table 2, next page.

Even though they may not have spent much prior time in the outdoors, youth demonstrated positive emotions and well-being, indicating that the new or uncertain circumstances did not create an obstacle to accessing these good feelings. Youth enthusiastically participated in new activities and in learning new concepts about the natural world. The only negative feelings expressed were irritability about the cold and about mud on nice shoes. Rainy days seemed to prompt more negative feelings, as well as cooler temperatures.

Figure 11. A Troop 100 member chose meditation on arrival at the St. Croix River



One exercise led by Asian Media Access specifically asked about emotions. After youth carefully examined a series of curated photos, they chose three that answered, “How did being in nature today make you feel?” The top expressions included *relaxed*, *happy*, *peaceful*, *cozy*, *surprising*, *disgusted* (at seeing dead bugs), *joy*, *appreciate*, and *adventurous*.

Time in the outdoors can often be deemphasized because, for some households, it may seem less important than other activities. These findings about the mental health benefits of outdoor time can support organizations, schools, park staff of the Implementing Agencies, and the Council in continued prioritization of youth access to the outdoors as *a key element to create healthy communities*, a goal of the Council’s regional Thrive MSP 2040 plan to enhance livability.

Table 6. Youth reactions and emotional responses

Well-Being Factor	Examples	Groups (out of 5)
New adventures, success at trying new things (self-efficacy)	<p>The youngest boy (age 14) remarked that the field challenge was “totally worth it” and all his siblings agreed. When asked about why he felt that way, he said he saw an eagle and other wildlife he doesn’t usually get to see and that the river view was something new and exciting for him.</p> <p>Another youth said, “I felt cool and adventurous being in the woods.” (Asian Media Access)</p>	5
Attentiveness to surroundings (mindfulness)	<p>A number of girls and adults, on reflection, continued to express wonder. “The water is so clear here.” “It is so peaceful.” (Asian Media Access)</p> <p>“I remember being in my habitat. The grass was so straight. It felt perfect. It was the prairie.” (Urban Roots youth, after visiting one of four habitats in Pine Point Regional Park.)</p> <p>“The sound and touch of the wind breeze also contributes to the feeling of relaxation for [the youth].” (Troop 100)</p>	4
Having fun (life satisfaction)	<p>“I feel like I’ve seen half the world. You can see so much. I felt like I was in a movie.” (Urban Roots youth)</p> <p>“Parks are really fun, [especially] when you’re with other people trying to make friends with them.” (Asian Media Access youth)</p>	5
Relaxation (lower perceived stress)	<p>“I was really stressed out before I came here. Now I feel calm.” (Urban Roots youth)</p> <p>One of the girls said she likes being up there because there is no sound. Even though there are busy roads nearby, she can’t hear anything, and that is relaxing. (Outdoor Latino MN)</p>	5

Youth recommendations for preferred activities

What makes a great day in the outdoors? Part of the answer lies in the right activities and programming. This section examines three aspects of youth preferences: desired park amenities, activities enjoyed during the in-park experience, and activities youth wanted to try. A detailed description of how the researchers learned these recommendations can be found in Appendix A (Methodology).

Desired Park Amenities

Park planners and designers have the opportunity to design in ways that support youth visitors. Youth want places they can go and be outside of adult judgment. “Parks are a good place to go with friends because you can spend time with your friends and you can talk privately without anyone hearing you because you’re on public property, not private property,” concluded one youth researcher from Urban Roots.

Unfortunately, there’s often a tendency to view young people’s presence in public spaces with suspicion or hostility. Because teenagers participate in different types of park activities than adults, they are often seen as threatening or vulnerable.⁵ Sometimes park caretakers focus more on policing young people than inviting them into public space.⁶ This is even more true for youth of color.

In general, young people lack spaces to be together with people their own age, independent of programs and facilities sponsored by adult institutions. In preparing this report, researchers overheard adults in the Twin Cities complaining about too many young people congregating around a dock and about being too loud in the park. Young people in parks have been treated harshly by police and sheriffs when their presence is seen as a problem. Park design would look different if the problem were defined as the lack of space for young people to be together, instead of how to avoid the presence of young people congregating in parks.

Park amenities are built or naturally occurring features of the park. Youth preferences can contribute to advice in park master planning processes that design or highlight such attributes. Youth enjoyed natural, resource-based amenities located close to spaces for games, food, and hanging out with friends. For example, youth delighted at sighting wild muskrats swimming around a den as they walked trails that enabled close access to a wetland area in Battle Creek Regional Park. They took photos and were careful not to disturb the animals.

This interaction was possible because the trail’s location was both close to the wetland area and easily accessible from the trailhead recreation center building. A 17-year-old, who reported coming to the research event “only because my parents made me,” reported that the visit to Spring Lake Park Reserve was “totally worth it” because they were able to spot an eagle.

The desired amenities are summarized in Table 3, next page.

Table 6. Park amenities desired by youth

Amenity	Why Youth Liked This Amenity
Bridges and docks that enable observation of the water	Could float natural objects down the river, watch the water, be meditative. Railings provide safe, close observation of water for those who couldn't swim.
Built environments that can double as "play areas," such as a dock, a post, a stone fishing pier	Enjoyed the challenge of balancing up on a wooden pole, walking on the wobbly dock.
Charging outlets	Could have phone to feel safe and stay connected.
Exploring taxidermic animals inside a visitor center	Opportunity to see animal fur and feathers close up and have questions answered by a naturalist.
Fire pit with benches	Enjoyed bonfire, s'mores, connecting with own community, telling important and fun stories by youth and adults.
First aid kits, emergency signal buttons	Safety, security.
Fishing dock/canoe launches	Fun to get close to water, space for play, like to fish with family.
Information boards	Learn more about nature, history, activities without having to ask for help or follow a schedule. Satisfy curiosity, feel more in control with more information.
Natural surface trails	Physical challenge, feeling of being in nature, sense of adventure.
Natural trails detouring from paved trails that go closer to water or into the woods	Could see the water close up, look at animal tracks on the water, explore natural setting while having an easy return to lower-risk pavement.
Open fields with mobile equipment to borrow for soccer	Play ball sports, impromptu play, chasing games, just hang around with friends during free time. "In our community, soccer is life," as one adult said.
Pavilion with picnic tables, gazebo	Easy to find so individual youth can rejoin the group after exploration, safe place to leave things with one person in charge, place for group to convene for rituals, place to sit protected by elements.
Places to hang out with friends away from other age groups (identified in master planning conversations with Pine Point Regional Park staff)	Ability to socialize, "Just be yourself." (Note: Gives youth an opportunity to learn autonomy and manage risk. Can't learn to gauge risk unless offered a chance to do so.)

Table 6. Park amenities desired by youth (cont.)

Amenity	Why Youth Liked This Amenity
Playgrounds	A setting for making videos on a popular short-video platform, space to play tag with multiple levels for different abilities.
Spaces to enjoy cultural touchstone activities like listening to music.	Supportive adults requested that parks consider times and spaces where groups could use amplified music. Music in the parks was a cultural touchstone. A parent from the Organization of Liberians of Minnesota commented, “The local parks do not want any music in the park. People have the event, and that is one of our community concerns, of music.”
Trails that pass close to habitats	Opportunity to see wildlife and habitats close up.
Visitor centers that allow for easy movement between the indoors and outdoors	Could come inside and warm up/cool down/meet physical needs, then head back outside. Enjoyment of outdoor observation without having to go outside.
Wide paved trails	Safety, security.
Wildlife viewing through the windows of a visitor center	Opportunity to see wildlife, enjoyment of outdoor observation without having to go outside.

Planning for Youth Visitors

Park planners can visualize facilities and amenities to solve the problems young people face in finding a sense of place for themselves, leisure-time activities, and space for independence and play. Park planning is an opportunity to examine conditions that may be less than welcoming because of park design. Initiatives such as providing opportunities to rent directional speakers, providing low-barrier access to picnic pavilions, and creating other youth-inviting spaces can reduce conflict with other park uses, while serving the visitation needs of young people. One youth researcher explained, “Maybe you don’t have a place to meet up with people, so you can use the park to meet up with them.” For example, the Pine Point Master Plan incorporated Urban Roots input to create spaces for young people to dream, relax, and socialize through star-gazing mounds and places to sit outside of the main picnic area.

Communication Strategies

After asking over 100 research participants how to communicate to build awareness, the Council staff recognized the challenge for Implementing Agencies to determine the best ways to reach out to youth and their families, particularly in households with lower awareness of the Regional Park System. There is no “one size fits all” regarding best ways to reach youth. Youth researchers spoke and read English fluently but noted that multilingual signs made it easier for their families to enjoy the parks. Information in other languages can relieve youth of having to serve as translators for older family members.

Relationships and context are as important to consider as particular tools and platforms. The next section includes findings about messaging, dissemination methods, and the influence of relationships and context.

Messaging

After the park visit, youth created posters and made presentations about the messages that their families and communities needed to hear to get them to the park. Key suggestions included:

- Parks offer stress relief and fun.
- Parks offer a chance to see animals.
- Parks help us breathe and protect the environment.
- Parks help families to build time together and make special experiences with friends.
- Visiting parks is an adventure. (*“Go outside, Bro!”*)

The value that youth put on photography is a potential communication strategy. As Implementing Agencies work to build awareness of photo opportunities, they might offer sites that are good locations for prom pictures, social media posts, and other elements that invite youth to enjoy photography in the outdoors.

Information platforms

No one platform dominates the information-seeking efforts of youth and their supportive adults. Recommended sources of information include distributing information in schools, putting up signs, Facebook posts in multiple languages, “tabling” at local events, and working with community organizations to disseminate information through their social media channels.

Peer-to-peer strategies

Messages from trusted audiences are another strategy revealed in this research for how organizations and participants communicated about the parks. Organizations used Facebook Live to stream events while they were happening in the parks. Organizations livestreamed both the validity conversations and in-park experiences. One organization posted to their Facebook page and another to their Instagram account about the in-park experiences. At least one youth made a TikTok video during the in-park experience. These peer-to-peer strategies created awareness of the parks beyond official efforts of park outreach and marketing.

Fun Things to Do in the Park

Youth participation in nature-based recreation can be different from the experience of previous generations in terms of enthusiasm toward various park amenities and constraints to recreation participation. Some documented differences include that youth feel^{7, 8}:

- Heightened concern about climate change.
- The sense that park use is a connection to nature, rather than merely a use of leisure time.
- A need to express their identity through social media posts, a need for individuality, and a desire for pursuit of new experiences.

While some aspects of outdoor enjoyment endure across generations, others may shift as these new motivations for visitation emerge among youth.

Prior Activity Experience

This section explores what youth said about previous activity experiences, activities they enjoyed with this project, and activities they would like to try.

Each youth researcher and youth from the Three Rivers Park District Teen Council were given a list of activities that people enjoy in regional parks. They were asked, “Which activities have you done before?” and “Which activities would you like to try?”

All youth research participants had spent time in the outdoors, but their activities varied. Activities that most teens in the group had done previously are listed in Table 4.

Teens from outdoor-focused organizations had previously done a wider variety of activities. For example, teens from the TRPD Youth Board had tried nearly every listed activity to do in summer and winter.

In contrast, Troop 100 had done many summer outdoor recreation activities related to camping and environmental activities, but reported a lack of opportunity to learn to ski or snowmobile. Troop 100 included youth who enjoyed swimming and those who hadn’t an opportunity to learn to swim.

Youth from organizations not focused on the outdoors nonetheless reported having spent time outdoors through time with family and friends, walking, and other outdoor exercise.

Table 4, next page, shows the favorite activities of youth from the six participating organizations.

Figure 11. Looking for birds at Spring Lake Park Reserve



Table 7. Favorite activities previously done by youth

TRPD Teen Council	Urban Roots	Troop 100	Asian Media Access/Celestial Paladins*	Outdoor Latino MN	Organization of Liberians in MN
Celebrate with family in the park	Celebrate with family in the park	Celebrate with family in the park	Celebrate with family in the park	Celebrate with family in the park	Celebrate with family in the park
Archery	Animal, wildlife or bird watching	Camping	Cooking outside/grilling	Concert outdoors	Concert outdoors
Camping	Camping	Canoeing	Walking	Cooking outside/grilling	Cooking outside/grilling
Cross-Country Skiing	Cooking outside/grilling	Cooking outside/grilling		Dog walking	Going to the beach
Dog Walking	Dog Walking	Fishing		Educational farming	Hang out with friends/relax
Fishing	Fishing	Going to the beach		Fishing	Picnicking
Going to the Beach	Going to the beach	Hang out with friends/relax		Going to the beach	Running/jogging
Hang Out with Friends/Just Relax	Hang out with friends/relax	Help take care of the parks		Hang out with friends/relax	
Help take care of parks	Help take care of the parks	Hiking		Hiking	
Kayaking	Kayaking	Learning about animals and nature with a teacher or naturalist		Learning about animals and nature with a teacher or naturalist	
Snow-boarding	Running/jogging	Running/jogging		Running/jogging	
Swimming	Scootering	Sledding		Swimming in a lake	
Tubing	Swimming in a lake	Swimming in a lake			

*AMA youth did not complete the activity-list check sheet. Instead, these preferences are based on information offered by youth in the photo expression activity and in informal conversation.

What Youth Enjoyed Doing in Parks

Council staff designed in-park experiences after talking to YSO staff and youth to find out what kinds of activities they would enjoy. The intent was to offer activities new to most of the youth in the group while also allowing time for things teens already enjoyed such as hikes and sports (Troop 100), nature education (Urban Roots), or hanging out with friends (all groups). Each in-park experience created a fun visit for youth participants, invited youth to parks they had not visited before, took advantage of amenities and park staff strengths, and/or created authentic engagement for park master planning. Each experience had separate activities.

Youth saw programming through a different lens than commonly used in recreation and park planning literature. Young researchers did not analyze activities using traditional oppositional concepts such as “active/passive” or “educational/recreational.” Instead, “boring/fun” and “wanting/not wanting to do” were classification schemes they used to evaluate activities. This section presents activities as they were named by youth researchers but includes data generated by all the sources – youth, supportive adults, Council staff, and Implementing Agencies. Table 5 summarizes all the activities that youth generated and analyzed for this research project.

Table 8. Activities enjoyed at in-park events

Urban Roots	Troop 100	Asian Media Access/Celestial Paladins	Outdoor Latino MN	Organization of Liberians in MN
Hiking	Pick-up ball games on an open field	Cyanotype art	Nature walk with environmental education	Photography class/photo challenge
Learning cultural history	Environmental education	Environmental education	Bonfire with s’mores	Bonfire with storytelling
Free time/free play	Free time/free play	Nature Walk	Field research challenge	Exploring nature center
Field research challenge	Tag and other group games	Bonfire with s’mores		Free play/free time
	Field research challenge			Walk near the park’s nature center

Council research staff observed and participated with youth to see how activities were experienced by teen visitors. Youth researchers reflected on these activities afterwards in validity conversations. Youth enjoyed a variety of activities. Photography, cultural history, and connection with their own community were important and often underappreciated activities that programming staff can consider when they plan programming to welcome youth into the park.

Culturally inclusive programming

Cultural competency is the ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures, values, beliefs, and traditions. Youth and adults requested that programming reflect diverse cultures to

a greater degree. Adults noticed when park promotional materials or historical information did not reflect their background. Noted one parent from Organization of Liberians in Minnesota:

Parks do not have us or our history in them. When children go, they see only white history. They do not see black history. How are the parks related to Africa? Are there animals that are here and in Africa? The children see only white history and they think, “oh, this is what white people do? Can the parks list countries of all the people who visit?

She said this could be accomplished if the diversity of the Twin Cities were included into exhibits found in park visitor centers.

There needs to be a cultural room and an art room – artists from around the world, from every type of culture. They could give the history of the bird and how the bird is found in other places. This kind of event would give others more reasons to visit. We need to feel that we are part of a society who appreciates us.

Another parent agreed, suggesting that naturalist education could identify connections between Minnesota and other locations, as well as shared names.

I know lots of species – peeper bird, tin tin bird. I’d like to learn the scientific names. There are plants in both places like the sunflower, the tulip. We would like to know the scientific names and what others call it.

[The National Park System created a youth curriculum](#) showing commonality between raptor and human migration. This curriculum focuses on parallels between the human and non-human animal worlds, as well as connections among human cultures. Signs can identify species such as the cattle egret or long-eared owl that live on different continents or species such as the Monarch butterfly that migrates through many countries.

Photography on mobile phones

Photography and filming using phones was a consistent and frequent activity for youth when they visited parks. Youth researchers identified several benefits of taking photos in parks:

- Photography in the park helps to “really see stuff. “
- Taking pictures helps make a good day in the park.
- You can share your day in the park with other people.

Youth enjoyed composing pictures with their friends in it, capturing new, beautiful or unusual scenes, identifying elements assigned in nature education, photographing animals, and marking “chapters” or sections of the day. Additionally, videos offered the chance for sharing special moments of the day or being creative in enticing spaces.

These activities seemed to work best when youth are invited to do activities in ways that align with the image they have of themselves. Youth researchers soundly rejected activities that asked them to post pictures from the park activities to Instagram. When asked why, one boy explained, “It doesn’t fit what I usually post.” On the other hand, when offered a chance to freely explore,

youth took pictures and posted to video-sharing platforms. They were frustrated when poor cell phone reception kept them from doing these activities.

Youth researchers recommended that parks highlight particularly appealing sites for photographs, considering that youth often look for ways to mark prom, birthdays, or other special occasions. Also valued was time set aside in programming to take pictures, as well as youth-only opportunities to learn about photography. After a day of learning photography at Elm Creek, one boy, age 16, commented to a Council research staff member that, because it was fun, he would voluntarily return to do the activity.

Learning about park history

At Pine Point Regional Park, youth researchers were fascinated by the opportunity to learn more about how people once lived and worked on a “poor farm” in the park, typically a [county-run operation](#) where able-bodied impoverished people were sent to live and required to work as a social welfare system. Youth were enthusiastic to learn about the social artifacts on the property, particularly the cemetery.

On the same tour, a brief mention of Indigenous history was made. Youth wanted more:

- “We need more photos to tell the history.”
- “We should paint railroad tracks on the trail to share the history of the place.”
- “You could have people dressed up from a certain time period, and you could even have a historical scavenger hunt where the reenactors can work at. If you do that, it’d be a famous park.”

Troop 100 alumni in their 20’s expressed a need for more Indigenous history. Some comments: Parks need to be thought about differently. Why are there white people running the land? Where is the history? Why isn’t Indigenous history a bigger part of the parks?

Community: ‘I want to see people gather’

Parents and youth together enjoyed sharing time involving community and culture. Gathering around a bonfire provided an opportunity to do so. Youth were excited when told they would go to a bonfire. One youth commented, “I wanna have a bonfire! I’ve never been to one. I’ve just never had the chance.” As the bonfire got started, one youth shouted, “C’mon, guys! Let’s hang out!” As the bonfire activity began, the park staff educator introduced the activity.

Each person around the circle was invited to tell a memorable story about a previous experience in nature. The educator instructed everyone to pause and not respond right away. He emphasized that everyone to take some time to share without being interrupted and that all should listen carefully. Anyone could pass for their turn if they preferred not to share.

As he began, adults with the Organization of Liberians in Minnesota joined in and started singing. One of the girls had remarked earlier that she wanted to sing around the campfire

Figure 13. Enjoying time around the bonfire



because it seemed fitting, so she was excited to hear the adults singing. A few others joined in and one person danced. OLM streamed the entire event on Facebook Live, bringing the connections felt during the event to a larger audience.

Parents in Outdoor Latino agreed that bonfires are an excellent programming choice:

With the kids socializing outdoors, you see a change. They are happier. They get back to the house different people, with more energy. They get out of the household routine. So I think that a bonfire in the cold is a great idea.

A young adult from Troop 100 advocated for having music in outdoor family gatherings:

We want to do karaoke outdoors at family gatherings. This is a competition that clans like to do at picnics. Every clan does a picnic. The whole clan will go together.

Youth researchers generated additional recommendations of ways to connect with their communities in the parks:

- *It would be fun to gather people around and grow things in the park like food or flowers.*
- *Let people come here and sell foods from their cultures so everyone can learn about new regions or cultures.*

Migration stories, bonfire programming, gardening in parks, and cultural festivals with food offer opportunities to increase cultural inclusivity in the parks and identify commonalities among communities in the region.

Environmental awareness

The youth connected their park experience with protecting the environment and with climate change.⁹ An Urban Roots researcher mentioned, “I go to Battle Creek and see trash on the ground and in the lake, and I’m like ‘Bro’, why are you treating the Earth like that? We live here!” This was reflected in youth comments about how to build community in the parks:

- The park could organize a competition to see who could pick up the most trash. The person who picked up the most could win a prize.
- Host opportunities for volunteers to come and clean the park and other ways to “take care of the Earth.”
- Host activities for volunteers to remove invasive species from the parks.

Activities Youth Would Like to Try

Table 6, next page, summarizes the top activities that youth said they’d like to try but hadn’t done before. Most popular answers were camping, archery, horseback riding, and winter activities (snowmobiling, tubing, and snowboarding).

Table 9. Top activities youth said they would like to try

TRPD Teen Council	Urban Roots	Troop 100	Asian Media Access/Celestial Paladins ¹⁰	Outdoor Latino MN	Organization of Liberians in MN
Animal, wildlife or bird watching	Archery	Help take care of parks	Camping/ “glamping,” sleeping time	Archery	Archery
Archery	Canoeing	Horseback riding	Learning to swim	Geocaching	Camping
Art in the outdoors	Concert outdoors	Kayaking	Special nature walks – fairy trail, tree maze	Horseback Riding	Concert Outdoors
Cooking outside/ grilling out	Geocaching	Snowboarding	Walking	Snowmobiling	Going to the beach
Geocaching	Horseback riding	Snowmobiling		Tubing on the snow	Horseback Riding
Hammocking	Kayaking				Learning about animals and nature with a teacher
Hang out with friends/just relax	Learning about history				Snowboarding
Help take care of parks	Tubing on the snow				

Youth-Planned Events

Youth researchers recommended programming that they themselves had a chance to design, implement, and enjoy. For example, youth of the Organization of Liberians in Minnesota wanted to help create “Park in the Dark,” an evening for teens where they can meet other teens and play laser tag as teams and roast marshmallows. Celestial Paladins offered a dance-festival idea in which they would come and perform at the park.

Creative ideas were offered that could be implemented with leadership opportunities for young people to plan and help deliver. They wanted to develop confidence in their outdoor skills, “I want to actually do some of the ideas we came up with, like learning how to make a fire and putting up a tent,” explained one youth researcher. Activities that involved physical challenges were appealing, such as ropes to climb trees or a climbing wall, and setting up a zip line in the park.

Design of park programming and its implementation offer unique opportunities to provide potential employment, leadership development, and confidence-building for young people. Paid employment of high school students in the summer can create potential opportunities to turn their creative ideas into park events.¹¹

Free Time

The Teen Council of the Three Rivers Park District and in-park YSO groups, by contrast, identified time constraints as the greatest obstacle. They had previously tried a wide array of winter activities, camping, and educational experiences. They wanted to have more free time in the outdoors. The desired activities listed in Table 6 for TRPD Teen Council members showed a preference for more time with their community members and for contemplation. Youth expressed interest in art and relaxation for in-park activities in the validity conversation between young adult Council researchers and TRPD Teen Council. This confirms that being in the park to connect with people and nature has merit in itself, not merely serving as a gateway to “true” outdoor adventure.

Camping and Camping Training Initiatives

I would like to have a sleeping time! That would great if this program had a sleeping anything. I would like cozy camping, glamping and cabins.

– Youth from Celestial Paladins

Is there a way to organize several families to go together camping? We could all go to the water. We could tell people that there are bathrooms, there are facilities, so they can know and be secure. More information is needed.

– Parent from Outdoor Latino Minnesota

Camping is the second most popular outdoor activity among youth nationally.¹² Additionally, camping and outdoor experience as a teen are highly predictive of doing these activities as an adult.¹³ However, the special aspects of camping call for additional proactive efforts by park agencies to remove obstacles.

First, the financial barriers to camping warrant consideration. Nonprofit and individual efforts have recently focused on directing funds toward providing camping gear, particularly for communities of color.¹⁴ Second, youth are concerned about safety. A fear of “strangers,” “homeless people” and “animals” were all mentioned in specific relation to camping. Second, new campers need assistance with the obstacles of awareness (where to camp, rules about camping), and economic barriers (opportunities to try out equipment). The opportunity to learn skills is necessary to make camping possible for youth. Third, just being a youth is an obstacle because young people cannot access camping without adult permission. Guardians who wanted youth to camp expressed skepticism about safety going with school friends or others whose safety standards were unknown. One mother explained:

There was no way I was going to let my girl go and camp with this family that I didn't know very well. At 8 years old, there was no way I was going to let them take my kid overnight.

Three Rivers Park District, Anoka County, and Minnesota DNR have initiative programs to address these obstacles through programs to borrow gear and learn to camp. TRPD partners with organizations rather than with individual families for camping education, a strategy supported by the data from this research.¹⁵ Community Engagement Supervisor Amanda Fong noted that camping skill development programs can connect youth serving organizations to camping skills and equipment. These programs offer training to organization leaders who want to introduce members to camping. They offer staff support, a trailer of equipment, and skills

learning. In Three Rivers Park District, organizations completing the training can borrow the equipment trailer to camp. This process introduces youth to camping through a trusted organization, increasing the likelihood that guardians will give permission to go. This will be discussed later under recommendations.

One group of youth who may not find camping to be the right activity fit are those who have experienced homelessness. Three Rivers Park District educator Kaja Vang noted that these youth may experience camping as a form of hardship or even traumatizing. Their observations provide two important findings. First, staff who understand youth context can use this awareness to design inclusive programming. Second, listening to specific youth populations will provide additional insights to support the equity, public health, and park sustainability goals inherent in connecting youth with the outdoors.

In conclusion, youth from all five organizations had either enjoyed camping or wanted to try it. Investments in introducing youth to camping would remove obstacles and build a future population of adult recreational campers.

Strategies and Planning

Youth require special consideration for planning and offering desired activities. On one hand, youth preferences align with adult ones. For example, youth reported that they enjoyed spending time with family in the park through fishing, picnicking, and socializing. On the other hand, they did not report an interest in walking dogs or walking on their own, activities that were highlighted in earlier Council research on park use among communities of color.

The Teen Council, whose members reported that that they were busy with academic demands and who had tried many outdoor activities, listed hammocking, being with friends, and nature viewing as top desired activities. The outdoors can be a space to *be* and *connect* as well as to do.

Youth audiences need focused engagement for park and trail planning as well as programming. Youth researchers reported that desired activities were not just a question of which activities but also in what kind of context, such as “Would I be able to do it with friends?” “Will there be other people like me in terms of identity and experience with the activity?”

This section is not meant to be a list of absolute recommendations, but rather an invitation for park staff to reflect on the unique needs of youth from different contexts, as well as the needs of youth to be heard and invited to the park as their authentic, whole selves.

Endnotes

- ¹ Minnesota Department of Health Center for Health Statistics. (2016). The Health of Adolescents - 2016. 1–11.
- ² Bluth, K., & Blanton, P. W. (2014). Mindfulness and self-compassion: Exploring pathways to adolescent emotional well-being. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 23(7), 1298–1309. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-013-9830-2>
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- ¹⁰ Asian Media Access completed a photo analysis activity designed by them to engage girls in talking about the outdoors and feelings related to the outdoors. Asian Media Access has worked in other settings as consultant for culturally responsive engagement on important policy topics. The engagement with this study led to unique insights about how youth in their organizations considered their relationship to the natural world and how parks fit within this relationship.
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- ¹⁴ Momo Jay. (2020, August 12). *Camping Gear for BIPOC*. [Video] YouTube. <https://youtu.be/21aK25SKQHU>
- ¹⁵ The Minnesota DNR program is targeted at individual families, a strategy that was neither supported nor unsupported in our research data. However, guardians who are uncertain about joining strangers for camping or are concerned about racism or not fitting in may be better served by the organizational approach used by Three Rivers Park District.