

## Chapter 4 | A New Understanding of ‘Prior Experience’

All youth approach their park visit in the context of prior personal, family, community and cultural experience. This context can shape what youth expect to see when they visit, what they anticipate being fun or interesting, and even whether their parents give them permission to visit a park at all. The youth may have had varying opportunities for outdoor recreation activities, but all had some previous park experience. This included overnight and day trips from school, time with family in outdoor recreation and leisure, science education, employment, and exploring with friends. Popular culture, community trauma, and family and community stories shaped youth understandings of their in-park visits.

### ***Prior formal education experiences***

At the in-park experiences, youth referred back to school and environmental education as they made sense of new information in park programming. Within the first 10 minutes of each in-park experience with Asian Media Access and Organization of Liberians of Minnesota, a youth visitor commented to Council researchers that they had been to a similar setting before on a school field trip, indicating the value of these prior experiences as users navigated a new outdoor space. School field trips continue to be an opportunity to build enthusiasm for exploring the outdoors.<sup>1</sup> Council staff and park Implementing Agencies can work to create shared resources for these foundational activities through shared brainstorming and collaborative evaluation research.

### ***Popular culture***

Popular culture experiences created context for youth outdoor engagement. This included YouTube videos and Japanese card games popular with youth. The guide on one in-park nature walk used the *Trees of Minnesota Field Guide*. Youth flipped through the Oak section to identify a leaf based on features such as lobes and sinuses. They placed a sample leaf in the Pin Oak section of the book. When a Council staff researcher asked what book they were using, they readily and enthusiastically explained that the book was useful for identifying plants and natural species “This book of trees is like a Pokédex. You have to catch them all!”

He was referring to the game Pokémon, a popular anime, manga, and card game series. The game includes an electronic device (the Pokédex) designed to catalogue and provide information regarding the various invented creatures of Pokémon. The boys in the group understood the exercise of tree identification using the analogy of the classification system required in the Pokémon game. The naturalist allowed time for open conversation about the comparison among the youth hikers. Comparing Pokédex to tree classification was an accurate, useful analogy that helped other youth understand what they were trying to accomplish on the hike.

In another example, youth were excited about seeing raccoons because they had learned about them in a YouTube video. The naturalist noticed raccoon tracks in the mud. Everyone listened closely as he explained that raccoons like to wash their food before eating. One of the adults referenced the popular video of raccoons washing cotton candy. The girls were very excited to see the raccoon tracks and interested to learn about raccoon habits, including their eating habits. For the Asian American youth participating in the activity, the video harkened back to their cultural world and prior experience, spurring excitement about sighting the tracks.

Adults often divide the world into online and offline, the “good” of the outdoors versus the “bad” of the electronic world. Although youth sometimes do this as well, the Pokémon and racoon video examples indicate that youth did not separate these worlds. Their excitement in the outdoors was bolstered by their prior “virtual” experiences with online and televised entertainment to add fun and insight to their park visit. Exploring how integrating the virtual and the nonvirtual worlds may be worthwhile to better connect young people to the outdoors,

## **Community understandings of human/nature relationship**

Community understandings of the human/nature relationship are collective experiences that influence how youth access to the outdoors. Parks and park systems were created using one set of these understandings when founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Members of the U.S. dominant culture who share these understandings often lack opportunity to examine how their own cultural beliefs shape their relationship to the outdoors. This section describes how all youth drew from their community beliefs about human/nature relationship as a lens for their own park experience. Additionally, this section examines the ways adults’ beliefs influence how and if they permit youth to access the outdoors. For park professionals, awareness of these aspects can enhance work with youth.

Community beliefs about human/nature relationship are one lens youth use to interpret their own park experience. Beliefs about characteristics of specific animals or plants are embedded in culture. Youth talked to staff about the meanings of flora and fauna in their community (see Appendix B for resources). Youth enjoyed sharing these stories and learning about each other’s experiences. Outdoor Latino Minnesota participants joked that they would take the mushrooms to make *pozole*, a type of Mexican soup. Rather than “leaving these stories at the door,” park programming and park information sources could invite youth to bring their own culture and cultural experiences to their time in parks. Park staff showed their own self-awareness regarding their own cultural beliefs and created space for youth to share cultural histories of the outdoors. Expressing these prior experiences helped youth see themselves in the outdoors.

Youth associated specific outdoor activities with their communities. When Council staff walked with Troop 100 Scouts to the St. Croix River, many commented that their families would think that it was a good spot to fish. “Fishing is a Hmong thing,” a boy told a Council researcher. “We go with my dad and uncles. They like to fish but I just go there to hang out and be with our family.” Another boy commented that the location was beautiful. “This would be a good fishing spot. It looks like there would be a lot of fish here,” he said.

Elders’ perspectives have direct impact on park access for teens. Parents and grandparents sometimes perceive the outdoors as dangerous. One Troop 100 father explained:

*Growing up, everything gets kind of lumped up together as the same, whether it’s a park or just the wilderness. A lot of it is generational. Growing up, my grandma would say, “We don’t want you breaking your arm or leg. Don’t climb a tree, don’t jump, don’t stay after school for programs. Your uncle broke his leg playing soccer, so you’re not going to break your leg.”*

Psychologists have documented broader parental beliefs involving biophobia, an anxiety or fear of the outdoors.<sup>3</sup> A white father described his family’s fear of “turning our kid loose to go outside.” His partner was afraid of dangerous strangers hurting their son if he went outdoors on his own. This concern demonstrates how “cultural pieces play a role sometimes,” as one father

explained. Hmong parents and youth described fears as also having a spiritual side. Hmong spiritual-cultural beliefs were mentioned in all three of the events where Hmong residents participated. A list of reading resources on this topic is included in Appendix B.

Hmong parents and teens emphasized that elders' beliefs were highly influential in connecting youth with the outdoors. Parents and guardians advocated that park programming work to include elders as a way to increase youth access to parks. Intentional engagement with Hmong adult day care centers was encouraged to build elder confidence for their grandchildren to access the park. One supportive adult laid out a complete plan of action of how parks could incorporate Hmong elder experiences to enhance youth access to parks:

*Reach out to Hmong elders at elder buildings [adult day care]. They love walks and nature. They [elder programs] have transportation and can get them there. They [elders] like to work out every day. If you have a Hmong translator [for park events], they will be more likely to bring children. Then the children can bring the grandchildren, this generation of youth. When the older generation [parents/guardians] come, the elderly come. You have to listen to older generations. We have a thing of hierarchy. We listen more to elders. We listen to them more and give them advice more.*

A second parent agreed, adding:

*The parks need to win the confidence of the elders. I suggest you go to Hmong day cares with the elders. Tell them about the parks. Take them to the parks They have the respect in the family. Having Hmong working in the parks is also important. Grandparents will be saying "you can't go [to parks], I don't know anyone there." When they find out that Hmong work there, they say, "Oh, they're hiring Hmong? Ok, we'll give it a try."*

In summary, experiences of community elders shape youth access to parks. This finding was particularly emphasized by adults in Hmong focus groups. They recommended:

- Recognizing that adults in the Hmong community draw from experiences that include past injuries, community experiences with racism and cultural beliefs about the human/nature relationship
- Providing accessible language and translation as a way for past experiences to fit into current park programming
- Building confidence through inclusive, equitable hiring
- Recognizing that connecting elders to parks helps win confidence for youth access to parks

## ***Community Trauma: Racism, Immigration, and Park Cultural Climate***

Prior unpleasant or traumatic experiences shaped how youth and supportive adults assessed the potential risks of visiting parks. The safety concerns expressed in Chapter 1 are experiences that youth visitors reference as they consider risks in the current in-park experience.

For example, when Council staff discussed with one group of Troop 100 youth about winter sports, one of the boys talked about a sledding accident that ended in a fractured leg. While we are unsure if he was talking about himself or a friend/family member, it was clear the threat of injury was of concern to him.

Parents of color specifically named experiences with racism as a deterrent to enjoying public spaces. This topic is worth revisiting to emphasize that prior experiences shape youth access and enjoyment of park visitation. As important experiences, these traumas did not have to have to the youth or the family personally. Nor did they have to happen every time. One racist incident in the outdoors became a collective experience that created discomfort, concern, or avoidance of youth park visitation. One incident in which a sheriff collaborated with immigration enforcement to improperly arrest an authorized Mexican immigrant led to Outdoor Latino Minnesota to avoid programming in the county where it happened.

Negative experiences with police in neighborhood parks led to skepticism about youth safety in regional parks. The adult or youth did not have to personally experience traumatic community events for them to be on the minds of parents considering time in the outdoors. After a focus group ended, one adult stopped the Council researcher and told her that a traumatic conflict between Hmong and white hunters in Wisconsin created a fear of being in the parks and being killed for not knowing the rules. Park agencies can respond through dialogue with communities, explicit efforts to create safety, and communications with parents about the safety of regional parks.

## ***Youth's prior experiences are an important part of their outdoor context***

### **Experiences Enhanced Enjoyment in the Parks**

Even youth who have spent much time in the outdoors do not always want to use their park-related expertise as part of planning a fun day in the outdoors. Paying attention to experiences in context leads to increased understanding of youth needs at that particular time. For example, TRPD Teen Council youth reported higher levels of expertise in the outdoors relative to other groups. However, they drew from other, nontechnical experiences. When asked what they wanted to do in parks, they preferred connecting with friends and family and contemplating nature. Similarly, young adults in Troop 100 had extensive experience in outdoor recreation. However, they focused on the lack of ethnic diversity among park staff and wanting to try new winter sports, rather than drawing on their expertise in fishing, camping, and hiking outdoors.

Prior outdoors experience remains relevant to youth programming, as it did enhance enjoyment of in-park activities and connection with others in the group. For example, the Washington County natural resource manager took younger Troop 100 members on a hike, and making a connection with his tour theme, said they had also learned about erosion in school. Older Scouts talked about their prior experience with tree identification with a volunteer Scoutmaster. After seeing an Eastern white cedar at St. Croix River Regional Park, one teen announced that they had seen “a lot of those on the North Shore.” When a guide pointed out buckthorn, the youths boomed in unison, with one saying, “This is invasive!” The youth enthusiasm on the tour

indicated that prior outdoors expertise helped build on the understanding of the current experience. Other experiences can also be acknowledged and incorporated to welcome youth to the park setting.

### **Integrating experience creates stronger youth connection with the outdoors**

Educational programming that builds on prior experience and knowledge is an effective tool to include youth. During in-park events, youth whose previous learning and concerns were acknowledged were more engaged. Even when it was a simple nod or an affirming word, the encouragement by programming staffing resulted in more enthusiastic answers to questions and trying new things. Through listening, bridging, and planning by park professionals, the prior experiences of youth can be welcomed into the Regional Park System.

## Endnotes

---

- <sup>1</sup> DeWitt, J., & Storksdieck, M. (2008). A short review of school field trips: Key findings from the past and implications for the future. *Visitor Studies*, 11(2), 181–197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10645570802355562>
- <sup>2</sup> Diouf, A. (2020). Challenging the White Narrative of Conservation. Retrieved October 13, 2020, from MBC website: <https://www.melaninbasecamp.com/trip-reports/2020/7/1/challenging-the-white-narrative>
- <sup>3</sup> Jago, R., Thompson, J. L., Page, A. S., Brockman, R., Cartwright, K., & Fox, K. R. (2009). License to be active: parental concerns and 10-11-year-old children's ability to be independently physically active. *Journal of Public Health*, 31(4), 472-477.