

Adventure Close to Home: Summary

Connecting Youth to the Regional Park System

Study Purpose

The metro area's system of regional parks and trails protect valuable natural resources, preserve wildlife habitat, and offer nature close to home for residents to enjoy. They help conserve biodiversity, purify air and water, control erosion, and help regulate the climate. The system includes 56 regional parks and park preserves and nearly 400 miles of regional trails.

Connecting teens with the outdoors has important implications for creating a healthy, equitable region with future support for the regional park system. Prioritizing this age group is important because teens experience unique developmental needs, obstacles, and circumstances related to park access. This study provides a better understanding to provide for their outdoor recreational needs and preferences.

Broadening support for regional parks. The future of our regional parks, to a great degree, is in the hands of the current and next generation of young people. As a result, strengthening their connection to the outdoors increases the likelihood they will support future public investment in our regional parks.

A visitor use study conducted by the Council in 2016 showed that involvement in nature-based outdoor recreation among young adults and their children has declined since the 1990s. Metro area youth could help strengthen broad-based public support for investing in regional parks and trails. Young people of color will account for 53% of residents under age 18 by 2040, so connecting these youth to the outdoors deserves high priority – for future support and to provide equitable opportunity to outdoor experiences.

Advancing equity. Equitable use can be defined as conditions where social categories do not predict whether someone visits parks and trails in the system. Access to and use of the regional parks and trail system by youth are crucial to achieving equitable use, particularly youth who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color.

Expanding public health. Access to parks and trails reduces medical costs and provides mental health benefits to youth. Contact with nature is a low-cost public health measure compared to conventional medical interventions. Time outside leads to improved general health in adults and children alike. Furthermore, park visitation helps protect youth from adverse mental health conditions and social isolation.

Supporting adolescent development. Time in green spaces has an even greater positive effect on self-esteem of adolescents than for other age groups, with greater benefit for those suffering from mental health conditions.

Identifying access issues for youth. Young people typically depend on someone else to get them to the parks. Teens rely more on organizations to connect them to the outdoors compared to younger and older people. Additionally, peer connections are more important for teens. As a result, young people's situations call for unique strategies to enable and motivate them to use the regional parks.

Understanding youth attitudes toward parks. Adolescents in general visit parks less often than children. They experience positive developmental outcomes from spending time in the outdoors.

This research project was designed to:

- Answer questions through relevant, credible data to enable the Metropolitan Council and Implementing Agencies of the Regional Park System to better meet the goals and requirements of the 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan and the forthcoming 2050 version of the plan.
- Enable youth to better engage in civic life and research.
- Build youth confidence in visiting parks.
- Value community expertise and knowledge in the planning process.
- Inform young people of career opportunities in parks, government, and research.
- Widely disseminate research for maximum impact.

The Council created a team that included Council researchers (four interns and one staff member), members of youth-serving community organizations (YSOs) and professional park Implementing Agency staff. All members of the research team – Council project researchers, youth researchers, supportive adults, and park staff – played a role throughout the research effort.

Obstacles to Youth Access to the Outdoors

A range of obstacles hinder youth access to the outdoors. Council researchers documented these findings through:

- Listening and observing as teens talked about or experienced obstacles to park access or enjoyment.
- Answers from supportive adults to questions posed in focus-group conversations.
- Information reviewed by youth participants in research “validity conversations,” where youth reflected on obstacles they faced.

From these data emerged seven main obstacles:

- Safety concerns
- Lack of opportunity to learn necessary skills
- Racist encounters in the parks
- Lack of parks’ cultural competency
- Busy youth lives
- Time constraints
- Transportation constraints
- Economic hardship

Safety concerns

The youth in this study expressed the need to feel safe when spending time in parks. In addition, supportive adults said they must feel that their youth will be safe for them to give permission to visit the parks.

When youth and supportive adults talked about safety, they expressed feelings about a range of factors, shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Safety concerns expressed by youth and supportive adults

Strangers hurting youth	Nature is unpredictable
Violence (gun violence, assaults)	Being in nature causes injuries
Violence from police, negative police encounters	Elders (grandparent generation) afraid for youth safety
Remoteness of park is dangerous (crime, illness, getting lost)	Protectiveness is a sign of good parenting

Positive nature-based experiences diminish safety concerns. This was true for both youth new to the parks and for groups that previously had more nature-based experiences. Parents with outdoor experience valued how time in the outdoors taught youth how to manage risk and be safer. Recommendations include:

- Park agencies can help create safer spaces for youth to hang out and consider how park spaces can be administered for successful intergenerational and intercultural use.
- Information about certain park events may help relieve safety concerns in the minds of youth.
- Nature and stranger-related safety concerns were greater for people with fewer prior experiences with regional parks. Without being familiar with the parks, adults and youth assessed park safety based on their experience with other public spaces or general understandings about the unpredictability associated with nature.
- Park agencies help foster feelings of safety when they provide information that helps users understand how to negotiate the park or trail.
- Youth and adults recommended that parks and trails have accessible security staff who are not police.
- Public data show that the Regional Park System is a safe public space in terms of crime, injuries, and animal encounters.
- Familiarity with the parks through in-park experiences, information about the ins-and-outs of what to do in the park, and encouragement to participate in activities and learning can contribute to encouraging park visitation.

Learning outdoor skills

To enjoy equitable access to parks, young people need opportunities to learn outdoor skills. Skills help them achieve feelings of competence, a necessary element in building motivation for them to seek outdoor activity.

Park agencies in the region have innovated to remove obstacles for youth to acquire outdoor skills. Efforts include targeted skills-building classes and courses at low and no cost. However, swimming instruction is not frequently addressed within the Regional Park System.

The research found that activities were often not clearly defined for newcomers. In addition, youth described a lack of structured opportunities to learn outdoor skills. Some skills, such as swimming, are baseline safety requirements to enjoy park amenities.

Parents and adult leaders expressed a desire for their youth and themselves to have more access to learning a range of skills. Examples included camping, nature knowledge, fishing, and instruction in some recreational activities. Table 2 shows the skills most desired by youth.

Table 2. Most desired new skills

Swimming	Bike riding
Camping	Sledding
Archery	Horseback riding
Cross-country skiing	Ice fishing
Survival skills such as fire-building, orienteering	

Eighty-three percent of system parks, special recreation features, or park reserves (54 out of 60) have water-based activities such as swimming, paddling, or boating. However, the general lack of opportunities for youth to learn this skill outside the park setting prevents them from fully enjoying the regional parks' water amenities.

Swimming was the most common programming opportunity deficit, but others included biking, winter sports, camping, and archery. Programming, information, and relationship-building can overcome this obstacle. Many people, both youth and parents, said that they would love the opportunity to develop new outdoor skills. These skills include swimming, boating, camping, biking, ice fishing, horseback riding, and many others.

Youth and adults talked passionately about the need to remove obstacles for families by eliminating fees and providing appropriate program scheduling. They said the application processes for free access to the parks for low-income families were cumbersome and difficult to find except for the extremely well informed.

In-park racism and unwelcoming park culture

Parents and youth of color recounted experiences with racism, racial exclusion, and negative cultural climate when visiting outdoor venues. The research identified two ways that racism affects the park experience for youth of color. The first is in-park racist acts, the encounters with police and other visitors that create a sense of discomfort, even danger. The second is unwelcoming park culture, the subtle and more obvious messages that make people of color feel unwelcomed.

The adults from all five of the study's youth supporting organizations specifically named racism as a deterrent to park visitation and enjoyment. Participants in all adult focus groups recounted incidents of racism in Minnesota natural spaces, including within the regional park and trail system.

Racialized policing of youth of color in parks and other public spaces is a national problem. Race and age intersect to create unique vulnerabilities for young people of color through negative police encounters, creating a major obstacle that prevents a growing demographic of Minnesotans from enjoying their public parks. Young men of color are particularly vulnerable. Supportive adults of color described these encounters with other visitors as ranging from "looks" to "questions" to aggressive behavior.

Young people and their supportive adults noticed and commented on occasions when they felt under scrutiny or felt too different from the majority of park visitors. Negative responses of other visitors – staring or making comments – can turn discomfort into avoidance.

Navigating the rules was a concern for both parents and youth. Youth can be afraid of inadvertently breaking the rules, and this concern was shared by parents. Some adults noted

that rules about food and music deterred adults from bringing youth to parks for family and cultural celebrations.

Parks and recreation staffing is a crucial component to connect youth with the outdoors. To make them to feel welcome, it's important for youth to see staff and others who look like them. Institutional barriers in parks job networks can keep professionals of color out of desirable parks and recreation jobs. Supportive adults in the study who themselves were recently teens advocated for parks staff who reflected diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The issue merits continued attention, honest dialogue, and bold action. Efforts to end in-park racism and other forms of racial exclusion require systemwide and all agencies' effort, with communication across agency sectors. In addition, the efforts need to come from the park system rather than expecting community members to be the change agents.

Lack of culturally relevant programming seemed to be a constraint that prevents a sense of belonging in park spaces. Youth recommended bringing cultures together and celebrating specific cultural heritage events. Park spaces can be more welcoming when they acknowledge inclusive histories. Many parks and trails have rich multicultural histories, including Indigenous connections to place, immigration stories, and African American architectural design.

Increasing awareness of park opportunities

Lack of awareness is a primary obstacle to park visitation. Awareness includes knowledge of park amenities and characteristics, but another element is the need for a shared vocabulary to understand what park agencies mean when they describe amenities. Lack of awareness among adults is a crucial obstacle to youth access to the outdoors. Because of transportation, family interdependence, and concerns about youth safety, youth most often access the parks through organizations or guardians.

Youth researchers' focus on amenities and characteristics ("things to do") suggests that potential users need to know what they can do in the parks to be motivated to visit them. To build awareness of in-park opportunities, information signs, especially in different languages, along with informational pamphlets, all contribute to visitors' experience.

According to the youth and adults, various types of media are just one strategy to build awareness. Although these couldn't replace first-hand experience, social media, print, and peer-to-peer media contact were all ways that youth and their supportive adults became aware of parks and outdoor opportunities. Other avenues include holding one-on-one meetings with leaders of youth-serving organizations and hosting awareness events.

Transportation access to parks

Lack of transportation to parks is a greater obstacle for youth than for adults, who typically have driver licenses. Teens are also affected by their parents' transportation constraints. Costs of transportation via private vehicle can limit park visitation by youth, and park visits can be a lower priority compared with other ways to spend money for leisure activities that involve transportation. Public transit was an option for park access for some teens over age 16, but it was less popular than walking, biking, or riding with parents.

Dedicated buses to parks was a popular recommendation from youth researchers. Normal transit routes sometimes require taking more than one bus, with stops located far from park entrances, and long travel times. Youth-serving organizations are partners that can offer access to transportation that parents trust.

Priorities and time constraints

Teens and parents cited various obstacles to spending time in the outdoors. Parent and youth work schedules and competing demands prevent park visitation. When young people face other demands, the “cost” of spending time in parks becomes very “expensive.” Poor transportation, long distance to parks, lack of awareness of visitation benefits, an encounter with racial bias, or lack of experience with culturally competent programming – any of them can reduce the payoff.

Strategies to foster park visitation

Positive outdoor experiences can help to shift time priorities. Youth who attended the in-park experiences repeatedly said that it was time well spent. After experiencing the park first-hand, they, in turn, became advocates for visiting the parks.

After spending time in parks and getting to know park staff, adults from one youth group said they would promote park visitation to others in their community. High-quality programming increased the perceived value of time spent in parks.

Different communities have unique scheduling preferences. Constituent-led organizations are in a position to help park staff understand specific time constraints of people within the various communities.

Well-aligned messaging can encourage teens and adults to prioritize youth park visitation. Recommended messages focus on the relationship between outdoors participation and health, educational benefits, possibly later employment opportunities, and reduced screen time.

Financial hardship

Youth described economic hardship as a contributor to transportation obstacles. Gas money for going to parks might be seen as extravagant, and limited public transportation to parks can hinder visitation. Programming and entrance fees might also seem a barrier, although these issues were mentioned less frequently.

Subsequent to this study, an increased number of families were experiencing hardship due to COVID-19. Lack of money and the need to prioritize spending contributed to lack of opportunity to learn skills, time constraints, and transportation constraints.

Creating the Best Park Experience for Youth

Parks and their staff play a major role in shaping the experience of youth visitors and in responding to the ideas and preferences of youth to make the experience even better.

Time spent in parks generates feelings of well-being

Efforts to connect young people to spaces that create feelings of well-being can be a public health investment. During the in-park experience, youth participants expressed feelings of well-being, mindfulness, positive emotions, life satisfaction, and lowered perceived stress.

Youth volunteered comments about the positive emotions generated by the park experience. They described openness and enjoyment of new adventures, as well as a sense of self-empowerment. Time in parks generated immediate, spontaneously expressed feelings of well-being while walking and talking in the park settings.

Youth recommendations for preferred activities

What makes a great day in the outdoors? Part of the answer lies in the right activities and programming. Youth preferences are divided into three parts, each summarized in the following

tables: Table 3 (desired park amenities), Table 4 (favorite activities done previously), Table 5 (activities enjoyed during the in-park experience), and Table 6 (activities youth wanted to try).

Table 3. Park amenities desired by youth

Amenity	Why Youth Liked This Amenity
Bridges and docks that enabled 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 fishing pier stone.	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 taxidermized animals inside a visitor center	Opportunity to see animal fur and feathers up-close, and have questions answered by a naturalist.
Fire pit with benches	Enjoyed bonfire, s'mores, connecting with own group, 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 to get closer to water or into the woods	Could see the water up-close, look at animal tracks on the water, explore natural setting while having an easy return to paved trail.
Open fields with mobile equipment to borrow for soccer.	Play ball sports, impromptu play, chasing games, just being with friends during free time.
Pavilion with picnic tables, gazebo	Easy to find so individual youth can rejoin the group after exploration, safe place to leave belongings with a person in charge and for group to convene. Being together for rituals, place to sit protected by elements.
Places to just hang out with friends away from other age groups	Ability to socialize, just be yourself.

Table 3. 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.
Spaces to enjoy cultural touchstone activities like listening to music.	Request from supportive adults that parks consider times, spaces where groups could use amplified music.
Trails that pass close to habitats	Opportunity to see wildlife and habitats up-close.
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. Enjoy 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 if youth preferred to stay inside.

Youth want places they can go and away from adult judgment. Unfortunately, social norms often view young people’s presence in public spaces with suspicion or hostility. Sometimes the focus is more on policing young people than on inviting them into public spaces. This is even more true for youth of color. Youth enjoyed natural, resource-based amenities located close to spaces for games, food, and hanging out with friends.

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. Park design can reduce conflict with other park uses, while serving the visitation needs of young people.

Fun things to do in the park

Youth from the various groups cited various favorite activities they’d done previously, comprising the wide range of activities shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Favorite activities of youth done previously

Animal, wildlife, and bird watching	Archery	Concert outdoors	Snow-boarding
Help take care of parks	Fishing	Educational farming	Swimming
Hang out with friends, relax	Canoeing	Going to the beach	Camping
Cross-country skiing	Walking	Sledding	Tubing
Cooking outside, grilling	Dog walking	Kayaking	Hiking
Running, jogging	Scoterling	Swimming in a lake	Picnicking
Leaning about animals and nature with teacher or naturalist	Celebrate with family in the park		

Table 5 shows the activities as they were named by youth researchers but includes data generated by all the sources – youth, supportive adults, and observations of staff of the Council and Implementing Agencies.

Table 5. Activities enjoyed at in-park events

Taking a walk near the park's nature center	Pick-up ball games on open field	Cyanotype art	Nature walk with environmental education
Learning cultural history	Environmental education	Hiking	Bonfire with s'mores
Field research challenge	Walk near the park's nature center	Nature walk	Photography class, photo challenge
Exploring nature center	Tag and other group games	Bonfire with storytelling	Free time, free play

Culturally inclusive programming

Youth and adults requested that programming invest to a greater degree in including diverse cultures. Adults noticed when park promotional materials or historical information did not reflect their background.

Comments and suggestions from group adults included incorporating a broader cultural perspective. Examples include posting artwork illustrating the connections in visitor centers, parallels between migrations of people and wildlife, species such as the long-eared owl that live on various continents, and the monarch butterfly, which migrates through several countries.

Photography on mobile phones

Photography and filming using mobile phones were consistent and frequent activities for youth when they visited parks. Youth researchers noted that photography helps to more carefully see things, create a fun time, and share the day with other people.

Youth enjoyed composing pictures that included their friends, capturing new, beautiful or unusual scenes, identifying elements assigned in nature education, photographing animals, and marking “chapters” or sections of the day. In addition, videos offered the chance to share special moments of the day or be creative in enticing spaces.

History, community and environmental awareness

Youth wanted to learn about inclusive history when visiting parks. They enjoyed hearing information about the social artifacts on the property such as cemeteries and old buildings. They wondered why pre-settlement, Indigenous history was not more detailed in parks, and why, more generally, parks rarely include that history.

Parents and youth raised ideas that could broaden park history and acknowledge community. Migration stories, organized bonfires, and cultural festivals with food were suggested to increase cultural inclusivity in the parks and identify commonalities among communities in the region.

The youth connected their park experience with protecting the environment and climate change. They suggested a competition to see who could pick up the most trash, host opportunities for volunteers to come to clean the park and other ways to “take care of the Earth,” and activities for volunteers to remove invasive species from the parks.

Activities youth would like to try

Young people wanted to try camping, archery, horseback riding, and winter activities (snowmobiling, tubing, and snowboarding). Table 6 summarizes the top activities that youth across all groups said they would like to try but hadn’t done before.

Table 6. Top activities youth said they would like to try

Animal, wildlife, or bird watching	Learning about history	Help take care of parks	Camping/glamping and “sleeping time”
tubing on the snow	Canoeing	Art in the outdoors	Learning about animals and nature with a teacher
Going to the beach	Concert outdoors	Learning to swim	Special nature walks: fairy trail, tree maze
Walking	Snowboarding	Archery	Cooking outside, grilling
Camping	Horseback riding	Snowmobiling	Hang out with friends, relax
Hammocking	Kayaking	Geocaching	

Youth-planned events

Design of park programming and its implementation offer unique opportunities to provide potential employment, leadership development, and confidence-building for young people.

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. Ideas included learning to build a fire and pitch a tent. 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 .

Members of one group had previously tried a wider array of winter activities, camping, and educational experiences. They wanted to have more free time in the outdoors to connect with nature and their cohorts, and for relaxation and contemplation.

Camping and camping training initiatives

According to a recent study, camping is the second most popular outdoor activity among youth nationally. However, barriers for youth groups in this study are considerable – financial (camping gear), concerns about safety (“strangers,” “animals”), awareness of where to camp and camping rules, and trying out equipment. In addition, 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.

Three Rivers Park District, Anoka County, and Minnesota DNR have initiative programs to address these obstacles through lending camping gear and offering instruction for learning to camp. Three Rivers partners with organizations in providing camping education. One group of

youth who may not consider camping the right activity are those who have experienced homelessness.

Communication strategies

What's the best ways to reach out to youth and their families, particularly in households with lower awareness of the Regional Park System? Answers from over 100 research participants produced a wide range of responses. There is no one-size-fits-all answer regarding best ways to reach youth.

Key messaging suggestions emerged from youth discussion:

- 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.

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 were all recommended strategies.

Peer-to-peer engagement created awareness of the parks beyond typical efforts of park outreach and marketing. Recommended strategies included messages from trusted audiences, live-streaming events from the park, posting in-park experiences to Facebook and Instagram accounts, and going LIVE via TikTok video.

A New Understanding of ‘Prior Experience’

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. However, what they took away from those park visits was shaped by popular culture, trauma their community had experienced, and family and community stories

At the in-park experiences, youth referred back to school and environmental education, including school field trips, as they made sense of new information in park programming. Youth used prior experiences with online and televised entertainment to add fun and insight to their park visit. Popular culture created context for youth outdoor engagement, including YouTube videos. A Japanese card game using a cataloging system served as analogy for classifying trees.

Community understandings of human/nature relationship

Community understandings of this relationship are collective experiences that influence how youth approach and consider the outdoors. Youth associated specific outdoor activities with their communities, such as collecting mushrooms or going fishing with family.

Parents and grandparents sometimes perceive the outdoors as dangerous. Experiences of community elders shape youth access to parks and beliefs about outdoor dangers are embedded in culture.

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. Parents of color specifically named experiences with racism as a deterrent to enjoying public spaces.

As important experiences, these traumas did not have to happen personally to the youth or the family. Nor did they have to happen every time. One racist incident in the outdoors became a collective experience that created discomfort, concern, or park avoidance from parents. Negative experiences with police in neighborhood parks led to skepticism about youth safety in regional parks.

Sometimes, recreation models focus exclusively on gaining progressively technical outdoor skills. But even youth who have spent much time in the outdoors do not always want to draw on their technical expertise to plan a fun day in the outdoors. For example, when asked what they wanted to do in the parks, teen outdoor enthusiasts said it was connecting with friends and family and enjoying the natural setting, not furthering technical outdoor skills.

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.

Staff and Programming

Park staff participants in this research included educators, outreach professionals, and naturalists. An important element for a great day in the outdoors is excellent staff. Over half of the nationally proven strategies to connect youth to the outdoors draw on the skills of programming and outreach staff.

Youth cannot access parks and trails on their own as easily as adults. Furthermore, programming intended for younger children is not appropriate for an older age group because teens seek activities that are more challenging, independent, and peer-focused. Knowledgeable staff can provide the developmentally appropriate access to information, thereby nurturing connections between youth and the outdoors.

An important question is why and how staff achieved these positive outcomes. Across all facets of the research, staff were observed to engage youth through sharing knowledge, sharing a love of the outdoors, and creating a welcoming and respectful environment.

Professionals sharing knowledge and love of the outdoors

Investment in highly skilled staff results in programming that connects youth and the outdoors. Staff make the experience fun, inclusive, welcoming, and safe. Skilled staff can contribute many kinds of education, nurturing, and welcoming during their time with youth. One naturalist provided resources to youth over 30 times in the course of 90 minutes, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. A naturalist’s contributions shared in 90 minutes

In a 90-minute walk, naturalist provided...	Number of times	Examples of contribution (across all five in-park experiences)
Nature education	17	Animal tracks and scat identification, water cycle, seed dispersal, species identification, animal adaptation, plant and fungi identification, bird migration
Information about how to visit park	5	Transit access, activities available, cell phone charging, and bathroom locations, how to apply for fee waivers, clothing offered for inclement weather
Games and new outdoor activities	4	Teaching how to do leaf races, photography composition, art collages, building fires, joining youth in open field pick-up games

Table 7. A naturalist’s contributions shared in 90 minutes (cont.)

In a 90-minute walk, naturalist provided...	Number of times	Examples of contribution (across all five in-park experiences)
Cultural, historical, and social information	2	Social history of park, how humans create objects from natural materials, pollution effects, information on possible park activities
Personal connection about the love of the outdoors	2	Storytelling about past outdoor experiences, sharing a personal first time of doing an outdoor activity
Reassurance about safety	1	Animals typically seen in the park, dealing with burrs, explanation for sounds heard
Answers to specific questions from youth or adults asked spontaneously	(Youth questions throughout the day)	How do people use this park? Does the creek freeze in winter? Are mushrooms edible? Is a pelt from a real squirrel?

Park staff provided information on a variety of topics during all in-park activities, shown in Table 8..

Table 8. Additional park staff contributions to building a welcoming experience

Contribution	Examples Observed
Guidance/advice	Career possibilities in parks, offering to write letters of recommendation, offering transportation to teen board meetings
Needed equipment	Ponchos, gloves, hats, cameras, binoculars
Cultural inclusivity	Flexible bonfire activity that groups could shape to own cultural preferences. Adapting programming for youth who have experienced homelessness. Staff with language fluency, empathy and personal experience to meet youth where they are
Acknowledgment of youth insights and knowledge	Youth opportunities to shape long-term planning, design programming, leadership structures that include youth, Teen Council-led programming. Hearing stories, opening rituals to connect, include youth in research. Use of “our and “we language to refer to the staff member and the youth.

Youth connected with park staff across differences. Staff were alert to the context to gauge when and how to share expertise. Rather than moving through a pre-programmed list of activities, staff conducted pre-event planning and also adapted the plans to specific contexts. When staff paid close attention to context, youth responded with eager engagement.

Creating a context of respect and welcome

Imagine yourself in the place of a first-time youth park visitor. They must navigate a new space, take direction from unfamiliar park staff, and do new activities they’ve never seen. In contrast, park staff arrive at work, a familiar place. They are figures of authority and in charge of the program agenda. Considering this meet-up from the point of view of youth visitors, this can

seem like an uneven encounter, whether a youth is comfortable in nature or a never-before-in-the-woods teen.

However, the high degree of staff adaptability and accommodation made the encounters effective because park staff created a context of respect and welcome. A skilled staff can help youth answer the question, “Do I belong here?” with a resounding “Yes!”

Staff contributed to a welcoming environment when they:

- Demonstrated that the outdoors was a place where youth could be themselves and express their own creativity.
- Created programming that reinforced the welcoming environment by inviting youth to voice their opinions.
- Gave youth opportunity to try out new skills – for example, photography and wildlife education. These skills were chosen based on what organizational partners wanted their youth to learn.
- Created a safe, positive environment in which youth could have fun.

The sense of belonging was created by making a space in which youth could “be themselves,” express their creativity, voice their opinions in decision-making processes, try new skills, and have fun in the process.

Recommendations to Connect Youth and the Outdoors

The recommendations focus on investments of attention, time, and resources for three sectors of the Regional Park System: Implementing Agency administration (funding, policies, and planning), programming and outreach staff, and the Metropolitan Council (convening action, master plan approval, research).

The recommendations reach toward four outcomes:

- Develop partnerships with affinity groups and constituent-led organizations.
- Develop, adapt, and implement models that overcome obstacles to the youth-park connection.
- Invest in inclusivity through staffing, programming, research, capacity-building and dialogue.
- Develop, adapt, and implement programming and outreach models that value youth’s prior experiences.

Seek strategic partnerships with affinity groups and constituent-led organizations

Building relationships with youth-serving organizations as well as with individual youth can result in productive advice regarding youth engagement, specific programming needs, and raising awareness about the parks and events.

As shown by this research project, a collaborative model can work well.

- It overcomes safety concerns of parents and guardians.
- It provides opportunity for learning skills. Organizations can help provide the structured environment to support park programming that teaches new skills.
- It provides protection from in-park racism and a source of support for youth, and organizations can communicate concerns to park staff.

- It raises awareness through the strong networks of youth-serving organizations.
- It reduces obstacles for transportation and time priorities. Organizations have structured time with youth and often have vehicles or carpooling arrangements.
- Organizations know youth as whole people. They are familiar with youth's previous experiences, prioritize youth leadership in their community, and can offer these insights when collaborating with outdoor initiatives.

Collaboration could entail:

- One-on-one meetings with organization youth and supportive adults to find out what they seek from outdoors experiences. (See conversation guide in [toolkit](#).)
- Follow up and check in with group. How did the event go? Recommendations for next time.
- Supporting the organization with resources. Free equipment, fee waivers, staff time, stipends.
- Informing organizations of opportunities; grants-seeking with organizations as appropriate.
- Recognizing organizational expertise and compensating them for this expertise when appropriate through microconsultancy grants.
- Recognition of how organizations contribute and listening to how an organization would like appreciation expressed (examples: public acknowledgement, certificates of completion).

Recommendations for Implementing Agencies

Investments and conversations

- Make programming and outreach staff a high budget priority.
- Involve youth as leaders and decision-makers.
- Commit to ongoing efforts to understand systemic and contextual concerns.

Programming and outreach staff

- Encourage and trust staff innovation.
- Expect and cultivate staff intercultural competency.
- Expect and cultivate staff enthusiasm to engage/include youth.

Park and trail planning and design

Park engagement and planner professionals can work together to understand user experience and relationships to parks and trails. All youth users bring experiences as they engage with parks, and they use these experiences to consider how to engage with the outdoors. Take time in master planning processes to learn about the prior experiences that inform what people want from their park system.

- **Include youth in all master planning engagement processes.** Youth can provide planners with information to help envision what parks and trails could be in the future. Consultants and agency planners can use the tools provided in the Council's online [toolkit](#) as well as locally created and other tools to engage with youth.
- **Draw on engagement with youth established in the master planning process.** Check-ins at the beginning of programming and listening during programming can be

opportunities to learn about and acknowledge experiences that inform what users want from parks.

- **Prioritize accurate and inclusive historical and cultural information.** Youth want expansive and more accurate telling of the region's history in the parks as well as culturally specific programming. Learning history in the park is a form of cultural enrichment. Youth and adults in the research expressed excitement in learning history and a desire for better, less ethnocentric historical narratives.

Recommendations for the Metropolitan Council

The Council can continue to emphasize that the connection of youth to parks is essential to achieving the Regional Park Policy Plan goals of strengthening equitable usage, conserving high-quality natural resources, and providing a comprehensive regional park and trail system. The system needs young people, even as young people need access to nature-based parks and trails.

Investments and convening efforts

- Expand the commitment to diversifying staff and membership of the Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission, hiring of interns, urban scholars, and research associates (entry-level positions accessible to recent college graduates).
- Pursue innovative ways to connect public transit to the Regional Park system. Prioritize investment by Metro Transit to connect residents to the park system.
- Identify ways that Council Members and other units of the Council can support the parks program in Community Development in connecting youth with parks (for example, connections with Environmental Services activities in parks, transit connections, attention to youth recreation needs in comprehensive planning).
- Develop resources for consultants and Implementing Agencies staff to enhance youth access to community engagement for planning as well as programming and outreach.

Outreach and research

- Invest in expanding research through engagement with youth-serving organizations that provide insight about outdoor access for youth who are African American, Indigenous, girls, LGBTQ+, gender nonconforming, disabled, and youth who live in rural areas, and youth experiencing homelessness or poverty.
- Respond to youth calls for more inclusive historical accounts and cultural information.
- Direct efforts from parks ambassador work toward youth serving organizations, teens, and their families.
- Analyze youth data in upcoming visitor studies and invest in research associates, and assign interns to analyze these data. Provide funding for activities with youth-serving organizations to evaluate the findings.
- Develop accountability metrics to measure improved access of youth to the regional parks and trails.

Master planning and policy

- Establish and implement a requirement for Implementing Agencies to conduct an equity analysis in their master plans.
- Direct Legacy funding towards micro-consultancies and noncompetitive grants that build community power and support innovative collaboration between Implementing Agencies and communities.
- Develop resources to connect programming and outreach with master planning processes.

Study Uses, Process and Methodology

Preparation process

- The research engaged affected communities and involved a community engagement process that connected youth organizations to park Implementing Agencies.
- Council researchers and YSO youth researchers and adults met at the start to review the process and identify priorities for outdoor experiences.

Methods

- Informal interviews, focus groups, and photography were generated as a way for youth to increase their awareness of the regional park system while contributing data and analysis.
- Council project researchers used qualitative methods, including a multi-faceted field experience, interview data, analysis of photos, validity conversations, focus groups, and youth-led discussion groups.
- Implementing Agency staff and Council researchers met to discuss park resources and potential staff contributions. Notes from these meetings became data to inform the findings. From these three-way meetings Council staff developed in-park experiences for the young participants, which took place during October and November 2019. In these experiences, youth completed a field research challenge, engaged in additional fun activities and educational activities with the naturalist, shared a meal, and discussed ideas with other participants.
- In November and December 2019, youth and Council researchers held validity conversations, a program of activities and discussion to verify the accuracy of the Council research findings. One YSO group analyzed visual data. The Council research team collaborated to create an activity book, this report, a [toolkit](#) of activities, and a presentation.

Youth in Parks report <https://metro council.org/YouthParksReport>