

Pennsylvania Parks and Forests: The Keystone for a Healthy State

An alarming trend has developed over the past few decades—we have become increasingly inactive as a nation. Children, especially, are spending more time indoors in front of electronics and less time outdoors. The link between physical inactivity and increasing rates of obesity has been established. In Pennsylvania alone, 64.2% of adults are overweight, and 29.7% of



Photo courtesy of Hal Korber/PGC.

children between the ages of 10-17 are overweight or obese.¹ If this trend continues, the current generation will experience a shorter life-span than their parents.²

Physical activity is clearly important to help reverse this trend. It has been shown to reduce the risk of dying from coronary heart disease, of developing high blood pressure, colon cancer and diabetes. It also has been shown to reduce blood pressure, help control weight, reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression and can promote a feeling of well-being.³

The connection between natural places and human physical and psychological health has also been well documented.⁴ Most community and state leaders now view parks not as amenities, but rather as essential features for healthy ecosystems, protection of water resources, recreation, personal well-being and overall health.

Accessible Recreation Opportunities

Our state parks and forests play a key role helping millions of Pennsylvanians achieve healthy lifestyles.



Photo courtesy of DCNR.

They provide convenient and inexpensive places in which to recreate, and there is strong evidence that when people have access to parks, forests and greenways they exercise more.⁵

The 2008 PA State Park Visitor study by Penn State found that Pennsylvanians who visit their state parks each year, do so to have fun, reduce stress and anxiety, and to connect to the outdoors. This is particularly important during times of economic downturn when more people vacation closer to home, choosing local and state parks and forests for their recreation destination.⁶

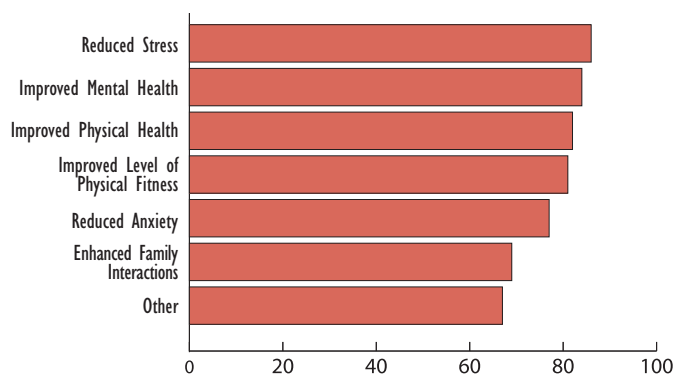
Today, Pennsylvanians have access to 117 state parks and 2.1 million acres of state forest land for recreational activities that includes trails for hiking, biking, skiing, water recreation, and numerous other activities.

Parks and Forests Promote Recreation and Exercise

A recent state-wide outdoor recreation survey of visitors and residents to state parks in Pennsylvania⁷ showed the following:

- State parks represent a major proportion of outdoor recreation available in Pennsylvania.
- More than 39 million state residents and visitors used the parks annually.
- 63% of state park visitors said that they engaged in some form of moderate physical activity during their visit and half (49%) reported that they were more physically active during their state park visit than in their daily lives.

To what extent does your outdoor recreation participation result in any of the following health benefits for you?



From: 2009 Outdoor Recreation in Pennsylvania, Resident Survey, Penn State University, Dept of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management

State parks offer a tremendous number and variety of outdoor recreation programs statewide. In 2009, more than 365,800 people participated in recreation programs offered at state parks.⁸ These programs include outdoor adventure camps like Eco-Camp where kids are introduced to conservation and environmental careers; and Adventure Camp, which encourages city youth to explore state parks and state forests.

Get Outdoors PA is a state-wide program to encourage children and adults to take part in a wide range of outdoor activities in state parks and forests throughout the year. In 2009, 63,636 people participated in a Get Outdoors PA activity. The Pennsylvania Parks and Forests Foundation's Great Pennsylvania Outdoor Challenge gives families the opportunity to take part in a wide range of recreational "challenges" at parks and forests across the state each fall.

Parks and Forests Provide Ecological Services Essential to Human Health and Well Being

Healthy forests help create a healthy environment in which to live. The basic "ecosystem services" that our forests provide include reducing storm water runoff, increasing air and water quality, and storing and sequestering atmospheric carbon.

Trees remove many pollutants from the atmosphere, including nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide, ozone, carbon monoxide, and tiny particulate matter.⁹

In addition, our state forests provide the critical ecological services of soil formation and soil retention, provide habitat for countless species (including microscopic soil-dwelling species that we are only now discovering), and provide homes for pollinators essential to the reproduction of plant species.¹⁰



Photo: Marci Mowery

Psychological and Social Health

Research shows that contact with the natural world improves physical and psychological health. A Trust for Public Land (TPL) publication on the health benefits of parks details the numerous research findings, including that exposure to nature promotes coping and health, exercise increases the brain's capacity for learning, and children with attention deficit disorder can concentrate on schoolwork better after taking part in activities in green settings.¹¹

Spending time in state parks and forests can help replace a missing ingredient in many people's daily environment that researchers feel is part of human genetic programming. One example from the TPL report is researcher Frances Kuo who "suggests that humans prefer nature in their landscapes because it is a key ingredient of human habitat, is essential to our psychological and social health, and has an apparent beneficial effect on blood pressure, heart rate, mood, day-to-day effectiveness, social behavior, cognitive functioning, and work performance."¹²



Photo: Joe Frassetta

Outdoor recreation can help improve the health of Pennsylvanians. With a state park or forest close to everyone, our state lands with accompanying programs are positioned to play a greater role in the future.

"... a growing body of research links our mental, physical, and spiritual health directly to our association with nature—in positive ways."¹³
—Richard Louv

Notes:

1. Statehealthfacts.org
2. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, March 2005, as cited in *National Institutes of Health News*, 3/16/05.
3. *A Report of the Surgeon General: Physical Activity and Health* (www.fitness.gov/adults.pdf), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.
- 4, 5. *The Benefits of Parks: Why America Needs More City Parks and Open Space* by Paul M. Sherer; published by Trust for Public Land; 2006.
6. *Governor's Outdoor Task Force Report—Healthy lifestyles*.
7. *Outdoor Recreation in Pennsylvania: Resident Survey*, Penn State University Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management, 2009.
8. Data made available from the PA State Parks Division of Outdoor Programming Services.
9. From American Forests website; www.americanforests.org/resources/urbanforests/naturevalue.php
10. *The Economic Value of New Jersey State Parks and Forests*, New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, June 2004.
- 11, 12. *The Health Benefits of Parks: How Parks Help Keep Americans and Their Communities Fit and Healthy* By Erica Gies. Published by Trust for Public Land, 2006.
13. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, Richard Louv, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2005.