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Recreation, social and education

1. Recreation

1.1 Introduction

Regional parks and forests provide a range of recreational opportunities and health benefits to our Region. These open spaces cannot only be used for physical activity but also for improving mental health. The benefits of physical activity are well-known, although less than half of the people in the Wellington Region are regularly physically active. There is increasing evidence that access to high quality green spaces can produce measurable improvements to stress levels in a relatively short space of time.

1.2 Recreational use of the parks and forests

Greater Wellington Regional Council's (GWRC) parks and forests provide for a wide range of recreational experiences in a variety of settings. They sit between the large, more remote, Department of Conservation forest parks and the smaller local parks, playgrounds and reserves managed by territorial authorities (both in terms of scale and focus). While the parks enable recreational experiences ranging from "coastal" to "back country", they are generally located near urban areas and are visited by people across the Region.

The range of natural settings available, such as forests, coasts, rivers or farmland, provides the park users with a variety of experiences.

Walking, running, mountain biking, camping and picnicking are the most popular activities in the parks but there is a wide array of recreational use, including horse riding, swimming, motorised recreation and hunting.

The 715 km of tracks within the network provides a variety of options for the recreational user, from well formed “walks” to lightly cut “routes” for the experienced tramper.

The track network is comprised of:

- Walks 174 km (24 percent)
- Tramps 253 km (35 percent)
- Routes 288 km (40 percent)

The majority of tracks are multi-use (i.e., pedestrians, cyclists, horses), and some are open for motorised recreation. The Hutt River Trail and other park linkages provide transport routes for more active commuters.

Picnic areas are well-used in all of the parks, while the camping facilities at Kaitoke Regional Park and Battle Hill Farm Forest Park have grown in popularity over time. Kayaking, swimming, fishing, orienteering and cycling are some other common recreational uses. People use these areas as individuals, in small groups or in large groups (the latter often associated with events). Major recreational events such as the *Karapoti Classic*, *Crazy Man* and *Midnight Madness* take place each year, while smaller scale events, such as school running competitions, gymkhanas and mountain-biking races are common, especially during the summer months.

The Regional Outdoors Programme gives the park visitor the opportunity to attend free, organised activities. Buggy walks have been very popular, while other events make use of the parks’ heritage and environmental trails. Involvement in plantings and restoration projects is a different form of recreation but provides exercise for the many volunteers.

Thirty percent of visitors said that visiting regional parks helped keep them fit and healthy and offered space to exercise [GWRC Parks 2008 Community Usage and Awareness Survey].

The reason why visitors say they use the parks and forests for their recreational experience is often linked to the mental health benefits

Visitors say that they receive significant mental health benefits from using regional parks:

They keep me in touch with nature and the outdoors (44 percent)

The experience uplifts or refreshes me and makes me feel relaxed. (33 percent)

I can get away from the stresses/strains/ pressures of the city. (17 percent)

2. Social

2.1 Introduction

The natural settings of the parks and forests provide opportunities for people to interact with each other in a relaxed way. The use of these areas can also help address social isolation, which is often an issue for new parents and retired people.

Parks provide settings for people to enhance their social networks and personal relationships from couples and families, to social clubs and organisations of all sizes, from casual picnicking to events days and festivals [*Healthy Parks Healthy People; The health benefits of contact with nature in a parks context*, School of Health and Social Development, Deakin University, 2008]

Environmental restoration or "care group" projects bring people together, increase ownership and pride (in the area). This is seen as evidence of a greater sense of community [Michelle Rush, *Take Care Programme Evaluation*, 2005]

2.2 Social uses of the parks

Six major "Friends" groups working currently in Wellington's regional parks are as follows:

- Friends of Belmont Regional Park - park advocacy, visitor education and planting
- Friends of Maara Roa - environmental restoration, education, advocacy
- Friends of Queen Elizabeth Park - park planning and fundraising, environmental restoration, recreation development
- Mainland Island Restoration Organisation (MIRO) - environmental restoration, visitor education
- ARAC - recreation development, visitor education, forest advocacy
- Combined Hutt Rotary Clubs - trail planning, development and fundraising

By working with these groups, we maintain ongoing dialogue with interested people, work collaboratively on issues and explore opportunities to improve the parks for the benefit of the community.

Regional parks offer opportunities to school, church and individuals to volunteer their time and efforts in restoring the natural environment. An increasing number of corporate groups are taking part in plantings in these areas.

Parks also offer areas of flexible open space for group events of all kinds. Some parks host school and club camps, activities and athletic events, e.g., cross country, orienteering, Scouts and Guides.

3. Education

3.1 Introduction

The parks and forests are located near large cities or towns and provide an educative experience for an "urbanised" population, especially children who may have had little experience of the outdoors. They are ideal locations for environmental education purposes.

Outdoor recreation has significant value to New Zealanders, including school students. By strongly supporting learning outcomes in many learning areas, it can provide many educational opportunities. In a country where people live close to the sea, rivers, streams, lakes, bush and hills, outdoor pursuits are an intrinsic part of our New Zealand culture. In a 2007 Education Outside the Classroom (EOTC) survey, 92 percent of schools believe EOTC is part of our national identity [Ministry of Education EOTC reference group submission to the SPARC Outdoor Recreation Review].

Whether children are engaged in adventurous outdoor activities or using the outdoors for more academically focused educational work, the experience of school visits is very valuable. Interests and enthusiasms nurtured on school trips can be interests and enthusiasms that can last a lifetime. Children tend to remember school outings because they can be stimulating and fun at the same time as being educational [CABE Education Foundation, United Kingdom, 2004].

3.2 Education in the parks and forests

- Hosting of numerous visits by schools located throughout the Wellington Region
- Hosting hundreds of school pupils at Arbor Day and other plantings each

year (Queen Elizabeth Park, Battle Hill Farm Forest Park, Hutt River Trail, Kaitoke Regional Park)

- Maintaining venues for the *Take Action for Water* environmental education programme (Belmont Regional Park, Wainuiomata Recreation Area, Battle Hill Farm Forest Park, Kaitoke Regional Park)
- Working with other agencies industry training organisations to promote career days to secondary school students, e.g., *Outstanding in the Field* (agriculture)
- Facilitating use of the parks by tertiary students to advance their studies, e.g., environmental/ health science, filming
- Working with other agencies and volunteer groups to educate members in planning and implementation of environmental restoration projects