

Backgrounder

Healthy by Nature

There is little doubt that protection of biodiversity, and maintenance of ecological integrity are among the most important challenges of our time and that conservation of protected areas is one of the most important strategies for achieving that end. The importance of a healthy ecosystem to the human population it supports are known. However, parks and other categories of protected areas are highly valued by society for more than just biodiversity and environment. They are recognized as landscapes that deeply touch the spiritual, cultural, aesthetic and relational dimensions of human existence; and there is a growing acceptance of the strong link between a healthy parks system and a healthy society. Yet, while a healthy ecosystem is recognized as essential to human health, it seems that the development of programs that use the natural environment as a foundation to promote human health have only been explored in a very preliminary way.

One of the most intriguing of those preliminary efforts has been the Australian initiative to establish a Healthy Parks, Healthy People program which first began communicating the importance of parks and nature for human health and well-being to governments and the community at large. The Australian example has been applied to programs for all levels of parks, and is a key part of parks messaging.

The initial interest of the Canadian Parks Council (CPC) in understanding the application of this concept in Canada coincided with the decision of Canada's Health Ministers to develop a Healthy Living Strategy. The paper Taking Action on Healthy Living, a preliminary document for the Healthy Living Strategy argues: This Healthy Living Strategy will improve the health of Canadians by supporting them in making positive health choices. It is founded on a population health approach, which recognizes that healthy behaviours are strongly influenced by the social, economic and physical environments where Canadians live, work, learn and play. The final Strategy similarly recognizes that factors like the built environment, and arguably, the natural environment, are known to have an impact on healthy living, making it clear that the contribution of setting to the pursuit of healthy lifestyles is recognized as important. Consequently, parks and protected area agencies have a huge natural advantage in seeking to attract the public and involve them in healthy activities. As a framework for action between many sectors, the Healthy Living Strategy recognizes that action towards common goals of healthy living and well-being will require collaboration between multiple players which will result in a more informed community and improved identification and communication of opportunities across sectors. Emphasis on health is on the upswing and Canadians love their parks. The link is a natural one and park agencies throughout Canada have a tremendous opportunity – individually and collectively – to reposition parks as an integral facet of a healthy population.

The social marketing campaign contemplated in the Healthy Living Strategy stresses the need for a personal and community-level commitment to making healthy choices. The

Working Group feels that the Parks sector can and should be a central part of the efforts to encourage Canadians to make such lifestyle changes.

Healthy by Nature Key Messages

PARKS: for your health - Parks offer a full range of physical activities in the great outdoors. Hiking, canoeing, skiing are all part of a healthier life.

PARKS: for your family - Parks are the very best settings in which to share memorable family experiences and strengthen relationships. Imagine the joy of storytelling around the campfire or the thrill of your child catching a fish for the first time.

PARKS: for your soul - Parks are the special places to rekindle your sense of wonder and solitude. Restore some balance – wake up to a bird’s song or quietly watch a deer and her fawn graze in a nearby meadow.

PARKS: for your community - Parks are in fact small communities unto themselves where all your neighbours have a pride in nature. And, when you visit these communities you’re also contributing to the economic well-being of nearby villages, towns and cities.

PARKS: for your environment - Parks protect wildlife habitat and ensure ecological diversity. You’ll see, feel and learn first hand, the importance of cleaner air, water and soil. By helping with the health of the environment, you can help your own health.

Encouraging Canadians to spend more time in parks will support improved physical and mental/emotional health, and can also serve to provide opportunities to inform and educate them about the important connections between healthy ecosystems and healthy human populations. The CPC has a unique opportunity to build a bridge between the parks agenda and the health promotion agenda and to demonstrate how the two sectors can work together to support one another.