

Benefits of Outdoor Recreation.



A literature review.



**Outdoor Recreation
Council of BC**

Benefits of Outdoor Recreation

A May 2023 Ipsos survey shows that seven out of every ten adult B.C. residents have participated in outdoor recreation in B.C. in the past twelve months, and 2.8 million adult British Columbians enjoyed the outdoors last year¹. Spending time outdoors promotes physical activity, social connectedness, enhanced knowledge of the natural surroundings, enjoyment and increased quality of life.

Outdoor recreation is also an economic powerhouse and serves as a significant economic multiplier. A recent study found outdoor recreation provides \$15 billion in economic benefits to British Columbians². It plays a crucial role in fostering community development and enhancing the prosperity of rural areas. By leveraging the appeal of their natural environments, communities can build and sustain economies that thrive on outdoor recreation, fostering diversity and resilience, while attracting investments, new residents and visitors.

In this short primer, we outline some of the key benefits of outdoor recreation.

Health and wellness

Physical health

Getting out into green and blue spaces enhances sleep, cuts stress, boosts fitness, improves heart health, and lowers health risks like high blood pressure and obesity. These health-boosting effects play a crucial role in lowering the risk of major illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, and type 2 diabetes³.

Beyond disease prevention, engaging in outdoor activities is linked to an enhanced perception of overall health and an improved physical quality of life. In the context of healthy aging, studies highlight how outdoor activities help seniors maintain their physical capabilities⁴. Moreover, exposure to sunlight assists in maintaining adequate vitamin D levels, especially beneficial for older individuals.

A research project calculated the energy expenditure and cost savings for chronic illnesses resulting from Oregonians' outdoor activities. The study revealed that residents expend a conservative 503 billion kcal yearly in 30 outdoor recreation activities, equivalent to 144 million pounds of body fat. The estimated annual cost of

¹ Ipsos (2023): [Trails and Outdoor Recreation in BC](#).

² Patrick Lloyd-Smith, P (2021). The economic benefits of recreation in Canada. Canadian Journal of Economics. 2021. Nov 54, 1684-1715

³ Eigenschenk, B, Thomann, A, McClure M, Davies L, Gregory M, Dettweiler U, Inglés E. (2019). International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health. 2019 Mar 15;16(6):937

⁴ Puett, R.; Teas, J.; Espana-Romero, V.; Artero, E.; Duck-chul, L.; Baruth, M.; Sui, X.; Montresor-Lopez, J.; Blair, S.N (2014). Physical Activity: Does Environment Make a Difference for Tension, Stress, Emotional Outlook, and Perceptions of Health Status? J. Phys. Act. Health 2014, 11, 1103–1511.

illness savings for Oregon is \$1.416 billion, constituting 3.6% of total healthcare expenditures and 17% of expenses for cardiovascular diseases, cancers, diabetes, and depression. The report underscores the role of parks and recreation providers in enhancing public health⁵.

Mental health and well-being

The positive benefits of outdoor recreation for mental health, well-being, and life satisfaction are well documented, both as preventative and curative measures. These benefits outweigh being physically active in a non-natural environment⁶.

Engaging in outdoor pursuits goes beyond influencing emotional well-being; it also promotes better emotional management and coping skills. Improved coping strategies and enhanced self-regulation have been noted not only across diverse groups but notably in demographics such as teenagers grappling with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and veterans⁷.

Besides the more functional perspective of aging, outdoor recreational activities offer a valuable source for active and happy aging, fostering positive social engagement, revitalization, tranquillity, and increased mood among older adults.

Stronger communities

Active citizenship

Engaging in outdoor recreation enhances physical well-being through exercise and exposure to nature and fosters social connections. Organized outdoor activities offer spaces for social interactions, creating opportunities for relationships that contribute to heightened social connectedness. This increased sense of community is linked to various benefits associated with active citizenship, including volunteering and communal advantages, such as the development and upkeep of local community life, identity, and pride. Additionally, outdoor recreation activities build bonding capital within families, groups, and communities⁸.

Inclusion and diversity

Outdoor recreation can be a powerful tool to foster inclusion and diversity at the community level. Ensuring trails, parks, and recreational areas are inclusive for people with disabilities or individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds helps encourage participation. Also, outdoor activities often bring people together.

⁵ Rosenberger, R. S.; Dunn, T. (2018). Health Benefits Estimates for Oregonians from Their Outdoor Recreation Participation in Oregon. College of Forestry. Oregon State University.

⁶ Thompson Coon, J.; Boddy, K.; Stein, K.; Whear, R.; Barton, J.; Depledge, M.H. (2011) Does Participating in Physical Activity in Outdoor Natural Environments Have a Greater Effect on Physical and Mental Wellbeing than Physical Activity Indoors? A Systematic Review. *Environ. Sci. Technol.* 2011, 45, 1761–1772.

⁷ Eigenschenk, B, Thomann, A, McClure M, Davies L, Gregory M, Dettweiler U, Inglešl E. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health.* 2019 Mar 15;16(6):937.

⁸ Ibid.

Organizing events, workshops, or groups focused on various recreational activities can attract diverse participants, fostering connections among people from different backgrounds. Collaborating with diverse organizations, community groups, or cultural centers can create opportunities for joint events or initiatives that promote inclusivity in outdoor recreation.

Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples

Outdoor recreation stakeholders can support reconciliation with Indigenous communities by respecting territories, collaborating on stewardship, and preserving culture. They can also educate about Indigenous heritage, create job and internship opportunities, and ensure access. Events held on Indigenous lands and allyship further strengthen bonds, fostering mutual understanding and respect.

Crime reduction and safer communities

A US research study indicates that green spaces have proven to shape neighbourhoods with lower rates of violence and property crimes when situated near residential zones. The reasons behind these findings highlight how crucial green environments are for both community and personal well-being. Being in natural settings helps alleviate mental fatigue and stress, which, in turn, reduces inattentiveness, irritability, and impulsiveness—recognized by psychologists as early signs of violence. Additionally, green spaces foster regular, informal interactions among neighbours. This promotes the development of social connections within neighbourhoods, forming the foundation for resilient, safe communities where mutual support, care, and protection are common⁹.

Environmental stewardship

Trails, boat launches and campgrounds offer access to the natural beauty in British Columbia. Meaningful time outdoors allows people to experience the benefits of nature and see the effects of their actions on the environment. In turn, these experiences can motivate people to become politically and socially involved in environmental issues¹⁰.

Well-managed trails and recreation amenities have several environmental benefits. They contribute to water and air purification, wildfire mitigation, erosion control, and carbon sequestration. Additionally, tourism can provide revenue for environmental efforts. For instance, Port Renfrew transitioned from being a logging town to a booming eco-tourism location. Today, Port Renfrew is known as the Tall Tree Capital. People work to protect the “tall trees,” and in doing so, they also enjoy the environmental and economic benefits of preserving the forest¹¹.

⁹ American Planning Association (2003). City Parks Forum Planning Papers #4.

¹⁰ Nickerson, Ron, Jonathan Vlaming, and Three Rivers Park District. "Why Parks and Trails Are Important." 2010. Quoted in MNP "Trails Strategy Review Report.

¹¹ Ancient Forest Alliance. Protecting Old Growth Rainforest to the Economic Benefit of Tourism-Based Communities." 2019. <https://ancientforestalliance.org/old-growth-economic-report/>

Diversified economies

Economic impact

Outdoor recreation plays a substantial role in British Columbia's economy. The outdoor industry encompasses several sectors, such as tourism, equipment manufacturing, hospitality, guiding services, and more. According to data from reports and studies, the economic impact of outdoor recreation in British Columbia includes billions of dollars annually to the province's economy through direct and indirect spending. It supports tens of thousands of jobs across various sectors, including tourism, hospitality, retail, manufacturing, communications, marketing, and services, while also substantial tax revenue for the province. Additionally, supports public and private investments made in infrastructure development, including trails, parks, campgrounds, and facilities, enhancing the outdoor experience and attracting visitors.

A project in Oregon assessed the economic value of residents' engagement in 56 outdoor activities in 2017. This 'total net economic value' measures the benefits minus associated costs, indicating societal well-being for cost-benefit analysis. The study found that Oregonians contribute around \$54.2 billion yearly (2018 USD) through outdoor recreation, helping compare the value of different recreational resources and guiding investment decisions¹².

Amenity migration

British Columbia's economy has long been tied to the export of natural resources, leading to rural communities historically relying on resource extraction. However, changing economic dynamics, including automation and flexible workforces, diminish stable employment opportunities in these areas. This shift drives many young people to urban centers for education and employment, resulting in declining and aging rural populations^{13,14}.

Despite being one of Canada's fastest-growing provinces, BC's rural areas are experiencing a projected 12.5% population decrease from 2011 to 2025. While the overall growth is driven by migration, most newcomers choose urban centers like Vancouver. Yet, a growing number of smaller rural communities like Golden, Cumberland, Whistler, Nelson, and Penticton defy this trend, maintaining or growing populations with revitalized economies and cultures, attracting a diverse mix of newcomers dubbed "amenity migrants"^{15,16}.

¹²Rosenberger, R. S. (2018). Total Net Economic Value from Residents' Outdoor Recreation Participation in Oregon. College of Forestry. Oregon State University.

¹³Chipeniuk, R. (2009). Planning for Amenity Migration in Canada. Mountain Research and Development. 24. 327-335.

¹⁴ Gosnell, Hannah & Abrams, Jesse. (2009). Amenity Migration: Diverse Conceptualizations of Drivers, Socioeconomic Dimensions, and Emerging Challenges. Geo Journal. 76. 303-322.

¹⁵Moazzami, B. (n.d.). Strengthening Rural Canada: Fewer & Older: The Population and Demographic Dilemma in Rural British Columbia

¹⁶Breen, Sarah & Gibson, Ryan & Markey, Sean & Lauzon, Al & Ryser, Laura. (2015). State of Rural Canada - 2015.

These migrants, diverse in age and wealth, seek rural life for various reasons: escaping city costs, and embracing unique cultures, but, overwhelmingly, though, they report being pulled by a connection to nature. They are looking for access to clean water and beautiful views, they want to be close to parks and other natural places, and mainly they are seeking the abundance of opportunities for leisure and outdoor recreation that rural towns have to offer. They vary from retired baby boomers seeking affordable land to younger professionals wanting a rural work-from-home lifestyle¹⁷.

However, amenity migration can bring challenges, the most prominent being increasing real estate prices and associated housing issues¹⁸. Additionally, new residents may bring different perspectives, leading to concerns about cultural changes and decreased community involvement. Some communities, like Nelson, address this through proactive programs, welcoming newcomers and encouraging their participation in local activities¹⁹.

Conclusion

Studies indicate that outdoor recreation contributes to achieving multiple outcomes and fosters lifelong engagement in physical activity. Because outdoor recreation is accessible and attractive to a broad audience, the benefits derived from these activities are inclusive and available to diverse participants.

Recreation is a revitalization strategy that can help many rural places foster healthy communities, bring in tourism dollars and attract residents who bring new tax dollars, ideas, and economic growth. Building these place-based strategies with the long-term fiscal and land use policies needed to manage growth can help rural communities find promising development approaches that work for them and thus help ensure that these recreational communities remain attractive places to visit and live in.

Since multiple benefits can be achieved simultaneously, outdoor recreation not only provides numerous benefits to residents and communities but can also be viewed as a highly cost-effective investment in health and community development from the perspective of decision-makers.

¹⁷Moazzami, B. (n.d.). Strengthening Rural Canada: Fewer & Older: The Population and Demographic Dilemma in Rural British Columbia.

¹⁸Stefanick, L., Gonzalez, R.V., & Pascal, N.S. (2008). The search for paradise: amenity migration and the growing pains of Western Canadian mountain towns. Presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Vancouver, British Columbia, June 2008.

¹⁹Chipeniuk, Raymond. (2009). Planning for Amenity Migration in Canada. *Mountain Research and Development*. 24. 327-335.