

VISITOR PERCEPTIONS OF THE BENEFITS OF A LOCAL PARK

Deborah Kerstetter
Recreation, Park and Tourism Management
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802
debk@psu.edu

Andrew Mowen
The Pennsylvania State University

Nathan Trauntvein
The Pennsylvania State University

Toni Liechty
The Pennsylvania State University

Nuno Rubiero
The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract.—Recent research regarding the perceived benefits of local parks has been limited, posing a problem for recreation and park directors who must promote the value of and gain support for aging park facilities. To collect evidence concerning the value of local parks and the impact of park upgrades, we conducted a study with one local park to (a) document behavioral changes that have occurred as a result of renovation, and (b) determine the perceived benefits of having a community park. Two-thirds of respondents reported visiting the park more frequently since renovations were completed. When asked why they visit the park and what makes it an attractive or appealing place to visit, they indicated that the park has a great atmosphere, is a great place to play, is a “third place,” is a safe play space, reduces playground fatigue, and has meaning for individuals of all ages.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the 1800s, a national reform movement led philanthropists and local governments to evaluate inner city urban landscapes that were impacting the safety of children (Addams 1909 cited in “Early history of

playgrounds in the United States” 2008). Initial efforts focused on the creation of playgrounds, which often included “a sandbox or sand pile, a balancing tree, jump standards, a see-saw, a swing frame with sliding poles and ladder, a flying Dutchman, and[/or] a giant stride” (“History of playgrounds” 2008). From the early days of the playground and parks movement, its leaders recognized the enormous individual, social, and economic values of these settings to their local neighborhoods.

Today, more than a century later, neighborhood parks are still regarded as important community assets that offer low- or no-cost, close-to-home recreation for a variety of populations. Specifically, public parks provide Americans with a place where they can be physically active, interact with other people, and achieve “the feelings of relaxation and peacefulness that contact with nature, recreation, and exposure to natural open spaces bring” (Dolesh et al. 2008, p. 2). They also provide green space or a “green infrastructure” (Wolf 2003), which keeps our living environment healthy and allows for the preservation of wildlife habitat. Similarly, Mitchell et al. (2008) argue that playgrounds provide “fun physical training environments” for children and older adults “whilst at the same time providing opportunities for social interaction.” These benefits of public parks and playgrounds would not be realized, however, without proper park design and layout (Yilmaz and Bulut 2007). Indeed, some of the nation’s best and most storied community parks were created by renowned landscape architects and urban planners who pictured them as places where neighbors of different backgrounds could come together as a community and recreate.

While historical evidence suggests that people derive multiple benefits from public parks and playgrounds, there has been limited research regarding the perceived benefits of today’s local parks. Recreation and park directors thus have little guidance as they work to promote the value of and gain support for aging park

facilities. To collect evidence concerning the value of local parks and the impact of park upgrades, our study (a) documented behavioral changes that have occurred as a result of park renovations, and (b) determined the perceived benefits of having a community park.

We used a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches and interviewed a variety of park visitors (i.e., residents and tourists representing different ages and stages in the life cycle) at one local park in Lewisburg, PA.

1.1 Study Site

The Lewisburg Area Recreation Authority (LARA) Park is a 22-acre multi-generational destination park that underwent a \$2.5 million renovation in 2005. With a matching grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and through the combined efforts of Playworld Systems®, local landscaping and construction companies, area engineering firms, and 4 years of assistance from members of the LARA board and community, the Park built a skate park, climbing boulders, multiple playgrounds, a senior wellness path, tennis courts, a basketball court, a pool, and a skating rink. According to then-LARA Director, Greg Weitzel, “[the] Park has been a great example of the health, tourism, and economic development benefits recreation and parks can bring to a community” (cited in St. Clair 2006).

2.0 METHODS

Individuals 18 years of age or older who were visiting the LARA Park in August 2007 were invited to participate in this study. A sampling plan was created to account for variation in visitation across days of the week and times of the day (i.e., 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.). Data collection, which took place on-site and through personal interviews, was conducted by a team of interviewers that had been instructed to randomly select potential respondents at various locations in the park. Individuals who agreed to participate in the survey were asked to answer 13 questions. The first five questions focused on their demographic characteristics (i.e., residence, age, group composition), whether or not this was their first visit to the park, and their knowledge of the recent

park renovation. The last eight questions pertained to perceived benefits of having the park in the community and behavioral changes that may have occurred as a result of the park renovations.

3.0 DATA ANALYSIS

To address our study objectives, we analyzed individuals’ responses to the following open-ended questions: “Have any of the park renovations changed your own (not your children’s) use of this Park? If yes, how?” “Have any of the park renovations changed what you do at the Park with your children? If yes, how?” and “What is it about Lewisburg Area Recreation Authority Park that makes it an attractive or appealing place to visit?”

To manage responses to our open-ended questions we used Huberman and Miles’s (1994) interactive model of data analysis (i.e., data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification). Data reduction and data display entailed several successive steps. First, two members of the research team independently read through the subsamples of quotes, generated codes, and then compared the codes and their relative representation in the data. Second, the resulting list of codes was refined by having two additional members of the research team independently read through the data and review the codes. Additional verification procedures included identifying the most prominent patterns of data, analyzing clusters of categories, and looking for negative statements that challenged the primary results.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 142 individuals were interviewed during August 2007. They ranged in age from 18 to 92 (average age = 42, median age = 37). The respondents were primarily female (61 percent), lived in the local area (80 percent), reported visiting the park previously (88 percent), and usually visited the park with members of their family (70 percent).

When asked if and how their behavior or that of their children had changed since the park renovation, a majority (67 percent) indicated that they visited

more frequently and 33 percent suggested they now spent more time using the equipment and facilities. When asked why they visit the park and what makes it an attractive or appealing place to visit, most of their responses were related to six themes: a great “atmosphere,” “a great place to play,” a “third place,” a “safe play space,” “reduces playground fatigue,” and has “meaning for individuals of all ages.”

4.1 Atmosphere

Nearly all of the respondents (94 percent) suggested that the atmosphere of the park led to its appeal. Atmosphere for some meant the design of the park—*“I think in general what they have done with landscaping and [the] playground is reason enough to come here”*—while for others it was the cleanliness of the park, the nicely maintained facilities, the friendliness of the people, the natural setting, and more.

Tucker et al. (2007), among others (e.g., French et al. 2001, Li et al. 2005), found that the physical environment influences adults’ decisions to visit a park. Our results suggest the same. In this study, however, respondents alluded to the overall atmosphere of the park, which included the physical environment as well as other intangible components (e.g., friendliness of people) that make up an experience.

4.2 A Great Place to Play

When asked why they visit the park, nearly all respondents mentioned the importance of the new playground equipment and facilities, including the LifeTrail® for senior citizens, the skate park for teens, and the playgrounds for children of all ages. Additionally, good design and the cleanliness of the park were recognized as assets. According to one respondent, *“[The park] is always very clean. ...it is aesthetically very nice.”* Another suggested, *“[The park] was designed and built for children’s safety.”* Similarly, many individuals recognized, appreciated, and were drawn to the park by the renovations: *“The playground equipment is more interesting [now]. It’s a much nicer environment than back when I used to*

come here and we had a little merry-go-round and some swings and some metal toys that rocked back and forth.”

In a critical analysis of the playground movement, Frost (2006) argued that late 20th-century playgrounds have been criticized for their “cookie cutter or standardized appearance, especially public school and park playgrounds where thousands are collections of massive steel and plastic, brightly colored superstructures, and swings” (p. 3). The same criticism could have been leveled against the LARA Park before the 2005 renovation. Now, after the renovation, respondents talked positively about the introduction of novel equipment and improvements to the overall aesthetics of the environment.

4.3 The Park as a “Third Place”

Parks and playgrounds provide opportunities for people to connect. As one mother noted, *“I think parks are just very important to the community... because of the social networking...”* Parks and playgrounds are also connected to people’s lives (Context® 2008) and serve as a play space for all individuals. As one respondent said, *“[The park] is kinda for all ages, [a] place for teens and little ones, [a] place for everyone.”*

Oldenburg (2001) coined the term, “third place,” to denote “public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (p. 16). His work has been supported by Gustafson (2001), who argued that such places as parks become meaningful because of the opportunities they create for people to engage in social interaction. In this study, individuals connected with others while walking through the park, sitting under the pavilions, and watching their children play on the playgrounds. In essence, they were comfortable visiting the park and felt that they belonged to a larger community (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001, Manzo 2005). According to DeGraaf and Jordan (2003), this sense of belonging is important in building the social capital necessary for increasing the perceived quality of life in a community.

4.4 A Safe Play Space

When asked why they visit the Park, nearly all mentioned the safety of the playground equipment and facilities. For example, one individual suggested, *“The equipment is perfect for her age [and] the rubber floors are a great asset.”* Others specifically mentioned the materials used in equipment production: *“The rides themselves...like the sliding board and everything. The paint on it is better because it keeps it from getting heated in the sun...”* Still others took time to address product safety: *“The tarmac stuff... is much better than the wood chips.”*

Cohen and Eimicke (cited in Shing and Marafa 2006) found that safety and cleanliness were important to users of urban parks in New York. Tucker et al. (2007) found the same emphasis on park safety and cleanliness among parents in Ontario, Canada. These findings suggest that the need for a safe, clean play space transcends geographic location or culture. Further, perceived safety appears to affect older adults' willingness to visit local parks (Mitchell et al. 2008).

4.5 Reduction in Playground Fatigue

As early as the 1970s, marketers recognized that the conscious design of space could create certain effects in individuals that would influence their behavior. This observation appears to be true in this study, where many individuals said that they get bored without variety in their park environments and that they visit this park along with others in the community to alleviate that boredom: *“My kids really like [the playground at Hufnagel Park], especially my older kids... They like both of the parks. We just kinda go there for variety.”* Others suggested that modifying activities in park spaces attracts their attention: *“At Hufnagel they [have] a lot of festivals. We go to those...”*

While children are drawn to the equipment, layout, and colors used in facilities (Wall and Berry 2007), Tucker et al. (2007) suggest that parents' preferences for parks also influence visitation. Thus, initiating new programs or modifying the ways in which individuals use equipment and facilities may result in increased park visitation.

4.6 Meaning for Individuals of all Ages

Individuals reported visiting LARA Park for a variety of reasons: to walk their dog; to look around and experience the *“pretty, natural setting;”* to socialize with other people; *“to chill;”* to enjoy *“wide open spaces for the kids to play;”* to *“[use] the playground, but also the exercise equipment for the adults;”* to use the skate park; to participate in *“lots of different activities;”* to share time with the grandchildren or other family members and friends; and more. In addition, they reported that parks offer a connection to the environment/nature and simply the chance to be out in *“...the fresh air.”* These responses suggest that parks are important spaces for children, but they also provide adults with opportunities for social interaction and relaxation.

Godbey et al. (1992) found that Americans receive five types of benefits from local park and recreation services: personal, environmental, social, economic, and family oriented. The importance of these benefits varies at the individual, household, and community level. More recently, Mowen, et al. (2008) found that park and recreation administrators identified *“providing a sense of community”* and *“improving physical and mental health and wellness”* as the most important benefits offered by their agency. Participants in the present study seem to agree with this finding even though they were not asked directly about sense of community or mental health and wellness.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

According to Common Good (2007), *“playgrounds have become boring—stripped of seesaws, swings, and jungle gyms...”* Based on the evidence from this study, that is not the case at the LARA Park. The Lewisburg Area Recreation Authority and its collaborators have succeeded in creating a high quality, multi-generational park that has sparked interest and excitement across various populations. Their success is reflected in the sizeable percentage of study participants who indicated that they now visit the park more frequently and spend more time using the equipment and facilities. Further, families find the

atmosphere in the park appealing and attribute the inviting and comfortable environment to the friendly people, the park design, and the available equipment as well as to the fact that there is something for everyone, regardless of age or ability.

What do these findings suggest for the managers of public parks and playgrounds? First, parks should be maintained and continually upgraded or modernized to respond to changing community tastes, needs, and composition. Second, park spaces should be designed to create opportunities for social interaction among individuals of all ages. Such design is important because mechanical clues (i.e., nonhuman elements such as well designed equipment) must be confirmed by humanic clues (i.e., human elements such as positive interaction with others) if consumers are to be satisfied with their experience (Wall and Berry 2007). Third, managers must remember that public parks and play spaces are part of a larger community landscape and often create a gateway to multiple physical, social, and cultural benefits for visitors. Fourth, safety is a concern. Thus, managers must maintain safety standards for their equipment and design parks and play spaces to minimize the risks to users.

This study represents an initial step in understanding how contemporary park upgrades, renovations, and designs may address today's pressing societal needs. However, given the study's cross-sectional design, the researchers were limited in their ability to gauge use of (and perceptions regarding) this park before the upgrades occurred. Future pre- and post-renovation investigations should attempt to document empirically the impact that major park upgrades have on attracting new users, changing on-site park behaviors, enhancing the park experience, and influencing citizen attitudes about the role and importance of community parks. As North America becomes more urbanized and diverse, park and recreation professionals will be challenged to provide quality "third places" that unite communities and respond to individual, social, and economic concerns. Proactively "raising the bar" by providing high quality facilities that promote community togetherness may elevate the role of community parks in people's everyday lives.

6.0 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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