

Top 10 Reasons Parks Are Important

By Richard J. Dolesh, Monica Hobbs Vinluan and Michael Phillips

Public parks and recreation offers countless value to our citizens and to our country. As advocates and supporters of parks and recreation who live these values every day, we may sometimes take the uncounted benefits of parks and recreation for granted. So we do not lose sight of the forest for the trees, every once in awhile it is useful to remind ourselves of these basic values and reaffirm their essential worth.

The following “top 10” list of park and recreation values is in no particular order; rather, it encompasses the range of why we collectively believe that public parks and recreation is an essential part of our national heritage:

1. Public parks provide millions of Americans with the opportunity to be physically active. Physical activity is an essential part of an individual’s efforts to stay healthy, fight obesity and prevent chronic conditions that lead to coronary disease, high blood pressure and diabetes. Having close-to-home access to places where one can recreate is one of the most important factors linking whether people will become active and stay that way.



2. Parks have true economic benefits. Proximity to a developed state, regional or community park improves property value. The economic benefits of park and recreation areas are manifold, but one of the most significant is the increase in value of private land adjacent or near protected public land. The proximity of parks to residential areas leads to increased value of private land, a higher tax base and ultimately many economic benefits to a community including increased local and regional revenue from heritage tourism, steady jobs, and numerous small business benefits. Park and recreation areas are economic engines that improve the quality of life and make communities livable and desirable for businesses and homeowners.

3. Parks provide vital green space in a fast-developing American landscape, and provide vegetative buffers to construction and development, thus reducing the effects of sprawl. More importantly, parks and public lands also provide groundwater recharge areas, floodplain protection, natural sound barriers, storm water protection from wetlands,

reductions in heat island effects, and carbon uptake from abundant trees and vegetation. Parks keep our living environment healthy.

4. Parks preserve critical wildlife habitat. As our nation develops and our rural, agricultural and forest landscape is being lost, open space and wildlife habitats are disappearing at an alarming rate. The connected network of local, regional, state and national parks across our country provide permanently protected wildlife habitat corridors for thousands of indigenous and migratory wildlife species. In addition, stream valley parks and community parks allow natural wildlife to co-exist with people while providing enjoyment and educational opportunity for children and families.



5. Parks and recreation facilitate social interactions that are critical to maintaining community cohesion and pride. Parks provide a meeting place where community members can develop social ties, and where healthy behavior is modeled and admired. People gather to share experiences, socialize and to build community bonds in common green spaces. These public commons are often the glue that holds the community together and the means to maintaining and improving future positive social interactions.

6. Leisure activities in parks improve moods reduce stress and enhance a sense of wellness. In an increasingly complex world, more and more people are placing a high value on achieving the feelings of relaxation and peacefulness that contact with nature, recreation and exposure to natural open spaces bring. People go to the park to get in a better mood, to reinvigorate themselves and to decrease the anxieties of daily life.



7. Recreational programs provide organized, structured, enjoyable activities for all ages. The diverse range of recreational programs offered by public park and recreation agencies offers all Americans the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to successfully and confidently engage in sports, dance, crafts and other social activities. Public recreation leagues and classes offer seniors, adults and children alike the opportunity to interact with coaches and teachers who often turn into mentors and role models. Quality recreational programs facilitate safety, good sportsmanship and community participation.

8. Community recreation services provide a refuge of safety for at-risk youth. Many parents are rightfully concerned with the dangers of unstructured "hanging-out" or unsupervised after-school activities. Community recreation programs at public park and recreation facilities provide children with a safe refuge and a place to play, which are important in reducing at-risk behavior such as drug use and gang involvement. Recreational programs led by trained leaders offer children healthy role models and give valuable life lessons to help steer youth to a future of promise and opportunity for success.

9. Therapeutic recreation is an outlet that individuals with disabilities have to be physically active, socially engaged and cognitively stimulated. A goal of all public recreation agencies is to provide access to all people. Public park and recreation agencies are the largest providers in America of high quality, life-enhancing therapeutic recreation programs and interventions. Such programs prevent the on-set of secondary conditions due to inactivity; improve physical, social, emotional and cognitive functioning; and slow the onset of regressive conditions.

10. Public parks embody the American tradition of preserving public lands for the benefit and use of all. Since the creation of the first national park and the subsequent development and growth of state, regional and local park systems in virtually every part of our nation, Americans have had a special relationship with their parks and public lands. A love of parks is one of the defining characteristics of our national identity. Americans love their parks, historical sites, national monuments, recreation areas and public open spaces because they bring such joy and pleasure to all people. In addition, the American public has shown time after time that they are willing to care for their parks, protect them, and pay for them.



This top 10 list is a resource for advocates to use in multiple ways: as background information to educate elected officials and members of Congress on the values of park and recreation; as key points when preparing testimony or letters; and as inspiration and positive reinforcement when the going gets tough. This list offers positive messages for why funding for park acquisition and development should be a priority as well as justification for why recreation programming is essential in every community that cares about its youth, its families and its seniors.

Citizens can and should carry these messages and not be shy about posing—and answering—this question to elected officials: Why are parks and recreation resources important to our community? These points can be helpful to local advocates who campaign for bond initiatives to support open space conservation and park acquisition, and they will assist those who lobby their local, state or national legislators to support funds for recreational programming.

Agencies can publish this list in their program guides and post it on their community and virtual bulletin boards. Policy and budgetary decision-makers at all levels, from city councils to economic development authorities to state legislatures, need to be educated and informed about the true value of public parks and recreation.

Richard J. Dolesh is director of NRPA Public Policy. Monica Hobbs Vinluan is the senior policy associate for health and wellness issues. Michael Phillips is policy and advocacy specialist for the division. E-mail: public_policy@nrpa.org