



Policy Paper, Series 1, No. 2

**Building Healthy, Sustainable Communities:
Policy Options for Enhancing Access to Nearby
Nature for Ontario Citizens**

Introduction

Ontario's Back to Nature Network is a growing and diverse group of organizations uniting to build capacity to connect children and nature in ongoing and meaningful ways through the creation of resources and the development of policy. Through its policy development, The Back to Nature Network aims to positively influence policies and programs at the provincial and local levels that will inspire decision makers to build healthy, sustainable communities by increasing access to nature for Ontario's citizens. This paper considers policy and program options that will improve quality of life and contribute to healthy, sustainable communities.

How we plan and develop our neighbourhoods, towns and cities has a tremendous impact on quality of life, on the health of citizens and the vibrancy of communities. The link between healthy communities and healthy people is a strong one. Communities that are well designed, walkable and with an abundance of green space have healthier residents, less crime, less social isolation and are more economically sustainable.^{1, 2}

The connection between public health and land use planning is well-documented. In Ontario, the Ontario Professional Planners Institute (OPPI) *Healthy Communities Initiative*³ is a comprehensive approach to promoting greater access to green space and nature in the built environment. The Back to Nature Network supports the work of OPPI and their call to action for Sustainable City Regions in Ontario.

In this paper, the Back to Nature Network is focusing more closely on improving access to green, natural spaces in communities. The concept of nearby nature is important. Again, the research shows that even small "doses" of nature improve emotional and physical health and wellbeing. Nearby nature translates into equitable access to green spaces for all residents, achieved through a hierarchy of connected parks, trails and natural spaces that are easily accessible.

¹ *Healthy by Nature: Up Close and Personal*, Alberta Recreation and Parks Association, 2009. Accessed 2013 at: <http://lin.ca/resource-details/13967>

² Kuo, Frances E. (Ming). *Parks and Other Green Environments: Essential Components of a Healthy Human Habitat*. National Recreation and Park Association, 2010. Accessed 2013 at: http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Publications_and_Research/Research/Papers/MingKuo-Research-Paper.pdf

³ <http://ontarioplanners.ca/Advocacy/Healthy-Communities-bull-Sustainable-Communities>

The purpose of this paper is to outline a range policy and program options at the local and provincial level that directly relate to planning, community design and the inclusion of nature in the built environment. These options provide short and long range opportunities that will have a positive effect on the health and wellbeing of Ontario's citizens and communities.

The options include:

- Creating a balanced approach to development and re-development of the urban/suburban built environment, integrating enhanced natural and green spaces and opportunities for active transportation.
- Addressing the infrastructure needs of communities through funding dedicated to parks and recreation.
- Enhance collaborative research with public health, planning and recreation/parks to link health surveillance with community design decisions.

Background

About the Back to Nature Network

In November 2008, Royal Botanical Gardens (RBG) hosted a Back to Nature conference and produced a “Back to Nature Event and Workshop Report”, which outlined short and long-term actions to create a movement to re-connect children and nature.

Supported by funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, the Network, led by RBG in collaboration with Ontario Nature and Parks and Recreation Ontario, has established a two-year work plan through March 2013 that will increase the capacity of organizations and educators to connect children, their families and communities to nature in a meaningful and sustained way through advocacy, education and the development of resources.

The Network now contains nearly sixty organizations that endorse the Network’s positioning statement:

A connection to the natural world is fundamental to all aspects of child development and is a key component to building optimal mental, emotional, social and physical health for every child. This critical link also represents a key building block for the future of a sustainable society.

Research shows that when we foster a child’s connection with nature, the child flourishes: child obesity decreases, bullying rates decrease, child injury rates decrease, while academic achievement rises, physical activity rates increase, attention spans improve, physical and cultural barriers melt away and environmental stewards of the future emerge.

More work needs to be done by our governments, our educational institutions, our communities, our families and individuals to develop and support the natural spaces and initiatives necessary for our children to thrive and the research to guide us as we make these important changes. Connecting our children to nature needs to be a provincial and national priority.

The undersigned are united in their concern about the present and future implications of this issue on the health of our children, our society and our environment.

The Network has hosted two policy development workshops, engaging stakeholders from education, environmental NGOs, recreation, parks and government. The result of these consultations has led to the development of a series of policy papers focused on the themes of education, health, planning and development and nature in communities.

The Benefits of Community Parks and Access to Nature

Intuitively, the majority of citizens understand the benefits of access to nature and most Ontarians live near parks and open space.⁴ However, we are spending less and less time outdoors. For example, a 2012 survey by the David Suzuki Foundation found that 70% of Canadian kids spend an hour or less outdoors each day. It is more important than ever that the connection between investing in parks and open space and broader community goals such as economic development, health, cultural inclusion, safety and community pride.

Where we live has a tremendous impact on our physical and mental health and well-being. This is one of the strongest social determinants of health. Within the myriad of interventions, providing people with access to high quality natural spaces in their communities and opportunities for active transportation is one of the investments with the largest potential return.

There are already numerous excellent literature reviews and papers that outline the many economic, health, environmental and societal benefits of parks and natural spaces.⁵ Below are some of the key considerations for communities in Ontario.

Civic Pride and Community Connectedness

Parks and natural spaces in communities foster civic engagement and break down isolation.⁶

Building Social Capital

Around the world, from Bogatá to Chicago to Dufferin Grove Park in Toronto, investments in parks, natural spaces and trails has led to greater civic engagement and higher levels of social capital.⁷

Healthier People

There is more research that can be done on the connection between population health and the built environment, but estimates by the World Health Organization (2006) state that about one-third of the global disease burden is due to modifiable environmental factors. Many of these factors, such as air and soil quality and climate change, can be improved by remediation through the development of natural parks and open spaces. In addition, a connected hierarchy of trails and parks offer people more opportunities for active transportation.

While many are aware of the physical health benefits of being active outdoors, the benefits to mental health are equally important.

Economic Development

Parks are an economic driver. Communities can increase revenues through both tourism and the tax base as a direct result of a high quality community environment including parks.

⁴ *Use and Benefits of Local Government Recreation and Parks Services: An Ontario Perspective*, Parks and Recreation Ontario, 2009. Accessed 2013 at: http://www.prontario.org/index.php/ci_id/3674.htm

⁵ See footnotes 1-3 above.

⁶ See for example: University of Toronto, *Growing Urban Health: Community gardening in South-East Toronto*.

⁷ Leyden, Kevin M. *Social Capital and the Built Environment: The Importance of Walkable Neighbourhoods*. AM Journal Public Health; September 2003.

Environmental Sustainability

Parks, trails and other natural spaces – so called Green Infrastructure – is a vital part of keeping communities safe and clean. Parks and open spaces are used by communities to: manage storm water; mitigate the effects of urban heat islands; prevent flooding and other natural hazards; protect biodiversity; provide a buffer between areas of diverse form and; enhance soil and air quality.

Parks and Culture

Parks are a common and valuable venue for arts cultural festivals and events. Because parks are generally open and accessible to all, these types of events are inclusive and promote social cohesion.

Community Safety

Well-designed parks actually contribute to community safety, because of increased civic pride and increased presence of people outdoors.

Policy Considerations

In Ontario, there is growing awareness of the benefits of building healthy communities. Since 2006, the Ontario Professional Planners Institute has been providing leadership for municipalities through policy development and the creation of resources.

In addition, the Provincial Policy Statement or PPS (under the Planning Act) is currently undergoing a review. The current draft incorporates healthy community design through parks, natural spaces and active transportation options.

Objective 1

Creating a balanced approach to development and re-development of the urban/suburban built environment, integrating enhanced natural and green spaces and opportunities for active transportation.

Rationale

Access to nearby nature – through parks, open spaces and trails – will ensure that everyone can benefit from regular access to nature.

Strategy 1.1

Continue to encourage municipalities, through guidance documents like the PPS, to design communities where citizen have access to different experiences in parks, natural spaces and on trails.

Strategy Cost: Low Impact: Medium Timelines: Ongoing

Strategy 1.2

Help communities develop planning policies and procedures that maximize the economic benefits of parks and green space for tourism and business.

Strategy Cost: Low Impact: Medium Timelines: Ongoing

Objective #2

Addressing the infrastructure needs of communities through funding dedicated to parks and recreation.

Rationale

Municipalities are under increasing fiscal pressure to update aging infrastructure. For many years, the emphasis has been on roads, bridges and sewers. This “grey” infrastructure is important for communities, but there is a growing recognition of the need to support green infrastructure as well for health, social and economic reasons.

Current programs, such as the Building Canada Fund, offer opportunities for municipalities to receive funding for recreation, parks and culture projects. And in 2013, the Gas Tax Fund was also opened up to recreation, culture, sport and tourism.

Strategy 2.1

Continue to include recreation, parks and culture as priorities for federal and provincial funding programs. Stakeholders should work together to ensure that all levels of government are aware of the need for investment and that innovative funding partnerships are encouraged.

Strategy Cost: High Impact: High Timelines: Ongoing

Strategy 2.2

The Provincial government should support a world-class system of accessible public trails by committing to an enhanced trails strategy and fund.

Strategy Cost: Medium Impact: High Timelines: Ongoing

Objective #3

Enhance collaborative research with public health, planning and recreation/parks to link health surveillance with community design decisions.

Rationale

There are many stakeholders in allied sectors – ranging from public health to environmental groups – who share similar goals for improving population health through access to nature and encouraging people to be more physically active outdoors. By increasing the evidence base and using knowledge transfer to share best practices, Ontario communities will have a broader range of tools and resources for planning healthy communities.

Strategy

Support collaborative partnerships that are working to collect and share information on the health impacts of community design and assessing the relationship between access to nature and community design.

Strategy Cost: Low Impact: Medium Timelines: Ongoing

Recommendations

While many efforts are underway to build healthier communities, it is recommended that the Provincial Government take a stronger leadership role in promoting the concept of healthy communities through provincial guidelines and regulations.

Locally, partnerships between local government, health, planning, environmental groups and parks and recreation organizations should be established or strengthened.

As stated by the OPPI in their 2007 Call to Action for Healthy Communities:

Good urban form, arising from careful planning and designing of our regions, cities, neighbourhoods, has the potential to positively influence health issues. It is functional, economically and environmentally sustainable, and liveable, in a way that promotes public health.

Communities that adopt these planning principles are walkable, cyclable and transit-supportive, include transit-oriented development, and promote alternatives to the single occupancy vehicle. These communities are safe and accessible to people of all ages. They have a strong character and distinctive identity and promote a sense of place through high-quality planning and design.