

Visitor Use and Non-Use at San Mateo County Parks: Preparing for the Future



Visiting parks has many benefits including improving health and wellness. This project aims to expand recreational services to meet the needs of your community. Find out how!

OVERVIEW & BACKGROUND

Outdoor recreation plays a vast and inevitable role in our lives across California and the nation. Consequently, research informs the management and delivery of parks and recreation opportunities across both public and private sectors. The San Mateo County (SMC) Parks Department has been in operation for more than 90 years and includes 20 parks spanning more than 17,000 acres. On average, 1.7 million visitors a year enjoy amazing habitats to recreate, spend time with their family, friends, and neighbors, and learn about the county's rich natural, historical and cultural resources. To address the recreational needs of their diverse and growing population, SMC Parks Dept., in partnership with San Francisco State University, is conducting a study of visitor use and non-visitor constraints. The overarching purpose is to examine attitudes, experiences, use patterns, and preferences of park users and identify barriers of non-users or less frequent visitors.

Researching both visitor use and constraints will help determine how SMC Parks are supporting their 2013-2018 strategic plan including the Parks Commission addition of "position parks as a community resource for health-focused settings, use, and activities." Generally, four priorities include:

1. Recreation Opportunities
2. Environmental Protection Programs
3. Interpretive and Education Programs
4. Volunteer Programs and Community Engagement

PROJECT GOALS

1. Understand visitor desires and preferences for park facilities, programs/ services, fees, and other related resources that meet the needs of changing populations.
2. Learn how people obtain their information about parks (e.g., communication channels, media, messaging) and determine how best to expand social and interactive media presence in the community.
3. Identify barriers preventing underserved/non-traditional communities from visiting SMC parks.
4. Enhance program partnerships regarding youth, health, and environmental literacy.
5. Provide ideas for new programs and facilities to enhance quality of the park user experience.

This study will assess visitor satisfaction, motivation, future demands, and provide new data for decision making. We will also offer recommendations for park programs, facilities, and policies, and innovative ways to enhance community engagement and access.



METHODOLOGY & OVERALL APPROACH

In addition to reviewing the literature and background reports from SMC Parks Dept., a two-phased approach, both qualitative and quantitative, will guide this study.

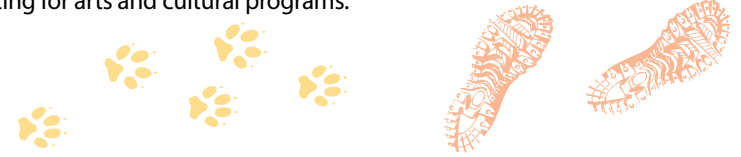
Phase I: Plan and conduct focus groups from September through November 2015 to examine barriers and constraints to park use

- Collaborate with local community leaders to host interview session and recruit focus group participants from predominantly culturally diverse and underserved populations.
- Implement focus groups at different county locations to ensure mixed representation.

Phase II: Conduct an on-site intercept survey at 10 of 20 park locations exploring visitor attitudes, perceptions, and future recommendations

- We will explore user behaviors, recreational desires, willingness to pay, perceived safety, etc.
- Volunteers will be trained to administer surveys at various trailheads employing a random sample technique to seek heterogeneity of responses.

Although park visitor use research has occurred for many decades, this is the first study of its kind for the SMC Parks Dept. Outdoor recreation spaces function as a conscious tool for community revitalization in many ways including resources for economic development, safe spaces, personal wellness, community engagement, help maintain green infrastructure vital for environmental sustainability, aid children in learning, promote public health, and provide a unique setting for arts and cultural programs.



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