

Parks: Community Places that Provide Restoration & Improved Physiological Health

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Key Words

Parks, Physiological Health, Restoration

Background

“A park is often considered an oasis of greenery in a concrete desert. For passersby as well as those who come into a park, its natural elements provide visual relief, seasonal change, and a link to the natural world”.¹

Parks that are proximate, attractive, and contain desired natural features can serve as nature scenes and the “exposures” which reduce everyday stressors associated with urban life. A discussion with park users revealed that “the word ‘parks’ was often used interchangeably with natural environment”.^{2a}

Early leaders developed urban parks based on notions of the physiological or restorative benefits they provided city dwellers.³ Access to and knowledge of attractive park spaces supports urbanites’ city experiences by providing exposure to natural settings and the associated “preventative”



benefits.⁴ Empirical evidence supports the notions that interacting visually or physically with nature can have positive outcomes on one’s health.^{5,6,7,8}

The results of various studies provide strong support that nearby nature affords a wide range of both psychological and physical benefits. “People feel more satisfied with their homes, with their lives, and with their jobs when they have sufficient access to nature in the urban environment.”⁵

Self-reported stress measures and physiological measures indicate that people in some state of stress experience greater degrees of restoration when viewing nature scenes compared to viewing those viewing urban scenes.⁹

Stress reduction rates of participants walking in a nature environment after being exposed to a stressor exceeded the rates of participants subjected to an urban walk or reading and listening to music.⁴

Many people use parks for these reasons. For example, park users in both London and San Francisco cited “contact with nature,” “relaxing,” and “resting” as primary reasons for visiting parks.

When users from both high and low density areas were asked to describe parks, terms such as “greenery,” “nature,” “relaxing,” “comfortable,” “tranquil,” “peaceful,” “calm,” “urban oasis,” and “sanctuary” were shared by more than 50% of park users.¹⁰

Qualitative analysis of Singapore residents’ perceptions of neighborhood parks provided multiple examples of the restorative or physiological benefits they perceive they gained

from having attractive, proximate parks. Respondents often talked about the parks as:

- a place to “think,”
- “calm down,”
- “to forget their worries,” and
- “to regain sanity and serenity”^{2b}

One respondent indicated that compared to her “built” home and “concrete” block, “parks were relaxing because of nature.”^{2a} Another respondent indicated that, “when I am in this park, I feel very relaxed and fresh, especially when you are surrounded with beautiful flowers, ponds, green and nice landscape, and birds flying across you.”^{2a} Complementing studies indicate that access or views of nature can reduce stress levels, a layman park user explained, “[the park] helps to calm one’s feelings...”^{2b}

As cities in Texas continue to urbanize and develop residential growth in downtown areas, it is important that leaders recognize the restorative and physiological values of green, open spaces and ensure they are appropriately distributed across their community.

Relevant Extension Resources

- Parkland Dedication Ordinances in Texas: A missed Opportunity. Texas AgriLife Bookstore Publication E-233.
- Natural Land Management Practices Online course: <http://agrilife.org/webcourses/2014/05/02/traps-professional-development-courses/>

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