

Opinion: Celebrate World Parks Week with 'less screen time, more green time'



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Four-year-old Elsa Lee checks out a yellow garden snail at Richmond Nature Park in April. After a long, cool winter it's time to get outside and celebrate World Parks Week. *MARK VAN MANEN / PNG FILES*

Time to Park It!

This cold, wet spring is one most British Columbians would rather forget. Record rainfalls, gloomy skies and unseasonably cooler temperatures meant people spent less time than normal in our province's great outdoors. For younger generations, this probably translated to more time spent sitting alone in front of a screen and away from fresh air and exercise with friends.

As an outdoor enthusiast, I was shocked to learn that Canadian children in Grades 6 to 12 currently spend an average of almost eight hours per day in front of a screen. This staggering statistic would suggest they do little else besides eat and sleep. However, with warmer, brighter days on the horizon, the time has come to reverse this nature deficit, re-energize our children by going outside, getting dirty and absorbing vitamin D. It is for their own good, after all.

Nature advocates have long claimed that parks and other green environments play an important role in overall human health. More recently, scientific assessment to support this claim has become available. Now, there is plenty of research showing that nature positively impacts the physical, psychological and social well-being of each of us.

The positive effects from spending time outdoors are abundant and varied. Benefits range from physical development to the easing of mental anxieties. Playing outside facilitates the progression of gross motor skills in children such as jumping, running and climbing, as well as fine motor skills like touching, feeling and scooping. Fresh air and exercise also positively affect mental health by reducing depression and anxiety, and helping people cope with stress, improve empathy towards others, and positively influence sleep quantity and quality. Nature will nurture their language and collaboration skills, improve their awareness, reasoning and observational abilities, and make them more eager to learn and play in more diverse ways. Apart from muddy shoes and grass stains, there is no downside to time spent in recreation and parks, and no doubt it is essential to building healthy, connected communities, and improving the quality of life of every British Columbian.

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Inactivity, disconnect from nature, and the related health and socioeconomic consequences that accompany them directly contribute to the national escalation of health-care costs and a perceived deterioration in quality of living. The recreation and parks sector has taken an essential role in combating this trend, from Port Renfrew to Fort St. John, supporting physical activity across B.C.'s communities leading to healthier lifestyles, stronger civic connections, increased productivity and sustainable economic growth.

The British Columbia Recreation and Parks Association is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to enhancing quality of life in our province through the power of parks and recreation. Together with our extensive network of members and partners, BCRPA supports the development of healthier individuals and communities, environments and economies.

BCRPA's network of stakeholders, including local and senior governments, community and industry organizations, the private sector, the fitness industry, volunteers and academia, all partner to increase and facilitate accessible physical activities that meet the needs of all residents (especially those of children and youth). Our mandate is to improve health and wellbeing, increase access to nature, and promote participation in community sport, and much more. We have some valuable partners working with us to achieve these green goals.

We are honoured to work with similarly minded organizations like B.C. Hydro, the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority and municipalities across the province. Our partners share our dedication to creating healthy, local communities and improving the overall sustainability of the region by

helping create green spaces in urban areas for all to enjoy. Without their support, we would not be able to achieve our goals. For example, the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority has generously provided 240,000 square metres of dedicated port land across 12 different Metro Vancouver municipalities for use as recreational green spaces. Together, we are ensuring British Columbians have access to the park lands they need for healthy, balanced living on Canada's west coast.

As we welcome World Parks Week (April 27 – May 7), now is the time to reconnect with our natural surroundings after a long, cold winter. Less screen time, more green time. Let's get our children outside and enjoy the many parks our beautiful province offers. Encourage them to kick a ball, catch frogs, daydream under a tree, dig in the sand, collect rocks, make mud pies, and play hide and seek. Better yet, join them.

Let's take it outside, British Columbians.

Rebecca Tunnacliffe is chief executive officer of the B.C. Recreation and Parks Association.