### Introduction

Canada’s terrestrial protected areas at the provincial, territorial and national levels number more than 5,900, representing 9.6 per cent of the nation’s total land base. Conservation objectives inscribed in legislation and related policy remain primarily ecologically-focused, and administrators predominantly direct management actions and focus ‘state of the resource’ reporting on maximizing ecological integrity and biodiversity-related outcomes. Despite the popularity of parks and other forms of protected areas as places to visit for recreation and leisure purposes (e.g., physical activity, relaxation and rejuvenation), and the large potential for promoting protected areas as places that support human health and well-being, scant research exists on the diverse perceived health and well-being benefits and benefits associated with visitation. Within this, there is also a lack of understanding on how the benefits received from visits to protected areas differentiate between population subgroups (e.g., youth and the elderly), and the potential management and policy interventions that could be developed to support healthy initiatives in Canada. As such, the role that protected areas play in enhancing human health and well-being has not been fully recognized. This poster highlights some of the results of a case study that identified visitors’ perceived health and well-being benefits associated with experiences provided by two parks in Canada.

### Methods

Surveying occurred in autumn 2011 in two protected areas: the Pinery Provincial Park, Ontario and Gatineau Park, Québec. Potential respondents were intercepted at various points (e.g., campsites, trails, and interpretive displays). The questionnaire was completed onsite using an Apple® iPad® and Survey software. Descriptive statistical and correlation analysis was performed using SPSS.

Well-being benefits (outcomes of visitation) derived from visiting the parks were measured with a set of questions assessing the extent to which participants perceived visiting the park affected various aspects of their well-being (e.g., physical well-being, psychological/emotional well-being, social well-being) measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (strongly disagree = 1, strongly agree = 7). Child development benefits were measured with a set of questions assessing the extent to which participants perceived visiting the parks affected various aspects of child health and well-being in general (e.g., physical development, social knowledge and competence, etc.) assessed on a 7-point Likert-type scale (strongly disagree = 1, strongly agree = 7). The questionnaire was completed on site using an Apple® iPad® and Survey software. Descriptive statistical and correlation analysis was performed using SPSS.

### Demographics

#### Physical Development

- 97% of respondents agreed that park experiences improve the physical development of children

#### Social Knowledge & Competence

- 94% of respondents agreed that park experiences improve social knowledge and competence in children

#### Cognitive Learning & Language

- 91% of respondents agreed that park experiences improve concentration, observation, & creativity in children

#### Hyperactivity/Inattention Issues

- 80% of respondents agreed that park experiences improve hyperactivity & inattention issues in children

### Statistical Significance

Age did not affect a person’s rankings of the various health and well-being benefits received from visiting the parks. However, several significant trends were evident for sex and income. Females tended to rate the social (p = .018), spiritual (p = .003) and environmental (p = .022) benefits as higher than males, whereas the lowest (less than $60k) and middle ($100-150k) income groups tended to rate the intellectual (p = .006), spiritual (p = .003), ecological (p = .052), cultural (p = .013) and recreation (p = .046) benefits higher. Notably, females rated 7 of the 8 benefits for children significantly higher than males.

### Summary of Findings

Results suggest that the expected human health and well-being benefits received from park experiences are a major personal value in the preference and choice to visit parks. With 72 per cent of responses being associated with a health and well-being improvement, and only 0.6 per cent associated with a perceived worsened state, the benefits received from park experiences are substantial, with physical, psychological/emotional, social, and ecological benefits identified as the most significantly improved aspects. The perceived health and well-being benefits associated with visitation suggest that the social capital housed within parks and other forms of protected areas deserves increased consideration within visitor experience monitoring, management programmes and associated ‘state-of-the-resource’ reporting (e.g., ‘State-of-the-Park’ reporting).

There may be sufficient justification to include social capital in ecosystem service assessments and strategic land-use planning exercises to provide additional compelling rationale towards conservation targets (such as Target 11 of the CBD Aichi Biodiversity Targets). This information can also be used to justify financial and political support for parks and protected areas.

Park and public health agencies should begin working together to better understand how parks and protected areas can be integrated into the health system, including treatment, prevention, public programme and policy development. They will also need to work together to develop communication and outreach strategies aimed at informing the public on how protected areas can contribute to healthy communities.

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### References

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