RESEARCH UPDATE

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An Outdoor Bill of Rights for California Children

A solid case for connecting children with nature and the outdoors.

"LIKE TO PLAY INSIDE, 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are," says a fourth grader in the 2005 book *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv. Yet, children are more active when they are outside rather than inside. Multiple studies indicate that childhood obesity is on the rise. Yet, participating in outdoor activities results in children being healthier, doing better in school, having better social skills and self image, and leads to happier and more fulfilled lives, Louv writes.

However, the 2008 Public Opinions and Attitudes on Outdoor Recreation in California (POA) study indicates many children prefer spending more time playing on computers than on playgrounds. Not having someone within their family who participates in outdoor activities has kept children from spending time outdoors, according to this study published in 2008 by the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

The California Roundtable on Recreation, Parks and Tourism created the California Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights (COBR). COBR lists 10 outdoor activities all children “should have a chance to experience between the ages of 4 and 14” (and beyond). The activities are designed to be simple and achievable with the goal of promoting outdoor recreation and a connection to nature and heritage.

The top 10 activities ranked include:

1. Play in the water (94.5 percent)
2. Play in a safe place (81.7 percent)
3. Hike, bike or ride on a trail (85.1 percent)
4. Explore nature outdoors (84.9 percent)
5. Visit a California historic site or history museum (84.6 percent)
6. Learn to swim (84.4 percent)
7. Play on a sports team (75.8 percent)
8. Celebrate your heritage (74.1 percent)
9. Go camping overnight (73.8 percent)
10. Catch a fish (57.9 percent)

Participating in these activities results in children being healthier and happier while strengthening family bonds. COBR activities appeal to children, parents, and organizations because they are fun, often educational, provide challenges, and result in potential physical, social, personal, and emotional benefits. COBR also serves as a catalyst in promoting collaboration among organizations and agencies. For example, the YMCA can offer swim lessons, local historical societies can be

The California Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights

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involved in cultural and heritage projects, and anglers groups can offer fishing opportunities.

The 2008 Public Opinions and Attitudes on Outdoor Recreation in California Survey

The 2008 Public Opinions and Attitudes on Outdoor Recreation in California (POA) survey measured participation in COBR activities through youth focus groups and a youth mail survey.

Methods
Questions for the California youth focus groups were developed following a format similar to one employed by the Oregon State Parks 2008-12 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). Researchers consulted a panel of experts in order to verify the relevance of the focus group script to its target population (California youth). The resulting script, composed of 10 questions, was used in 2007 and 2008 with focus groups in cities within four geographical regions of California that represent 90 percent of the state's population: San Diego, Modesto, Livermore, and the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Seventy-two California youths who were participants in programs at community recreation centers served as interviewees. They were divided into groups based on age (10-13 and 14-17). Eight focus-group sessions were recorded, seven of which were usable and transcribed by a research assistant. Field notes were utilized for the eighth session. A researcher and a research assistant reviewed transcribed results and coded responses into thematic categories, with a 90 percent agreement rate between them. To resolve the discrepancy, original transcriptions were re-reviewed to examine the thematic categories. To develop larger themes (also known as axial codes), previous leisure research was consulted. A third researcher reviewed the three to seven themes that emerged per question.

Results of the focus group data analysis assisted in the development of questions on the mail-back/online survey. This survey was administered to youth residents of California whose parents/guardians were contacted between April and June 2008 using a random sample of telephone numbers within the state. Data were collected during April through June 2008. Adult respondents to a telephone survey were asked if they had youth residing with them between the ages of 12 and 17, and for permission for those youth to participate in the youth portion of the study. The youth and adult versions of the questionnaire were mailed together, with Spanish versions being sent to Spanish-speaking households. Approximately three weeks after the initial mail packet was sent, all participants were mailed a reminder postcard about the importance of their participation in the study. Three hundred ninety-seven youths completed the mail-back/online questionnaire. An incentive of $5 to participate was mailed to the youth respondents. One item on the survey asked the youths about participation in the 10 COBR activities. The subjects also indicated reasons they did and did not participate in the activities.

Results: Focus Group
Youth focus group participants (N=72) were Hispanic (n=25), Caucasian (n=21) and African American (n=16) and males and females were equally represented. Other populations included Asian, Native American, and multiracial. Key themes from the focus groups emerged relating to nine of the 10 COBR activities.

Splash in the water
The participants expressed an interest in water parks and water activities, including surfing, swimming, jet skiing, inner-tubing, and kayaking. Many youths enjoy the water and several mentioned that they would like more availability of swimming pools in their recreational centers or communities.

"I don't know for some reason my favorite thing is to be in the water when it's raining it's like my favorite thing..."
"Even when I don't go surfing I take my wetsuit and just go out in the water in Santa Cruz there are places that are tropical that I go surfing and stuff, I'm just a freak for the beach and the water and stuff."

Play in a safe place
Participants expressed many concerns relating to opportunities to play in safe places. These included gangs, older youth in parks, and the homeless population. They also commented about facility-related issues, such as drug use in public restrooms, needles in the sand (in play areas), and lack of lighting. Some recounted that their parents do not allow them to play outside because of their concerns regarding the lack of safety and supervision. Some youth recommended that agencies post security guards and police stations in parks.

"This park, there is a group... that hangs out... it's kinda scary when I'm..."
**Camp under the stars**

Camping emerged as a common activity among focus group participants. Camping locations ranged from backyards to forests, and many activities such as roasting s’mores and telling scary stories are favorite activities while camping. The participants normally camped with youth center programs, school camps, and family.

- "...learned how to make a fire... learned about...animals."
- "I went to this camp. They took us on hikes and we played capture the flag."
- "Um, well my family is really big on camping and hiking...every year we go."

**Explore nature**

Nature themes emerged but only two participants spoke about nature exploration.

- "We go there a lot (park) and just sit there, there’s like roses and there’s like hills to sit on and stuff..."

**Learn to swim**

Swimming in pools and lakes was a popular outdoor activity among the participants. Over half of the respondents had been swimming in the ocean. They stated that the water is a good place to cool off, hang out with friends, and they enjoyed the feel of the water.

- "Swimming because it’s my favorite sport to do and um like when I swim sometimes it helps me get better."

**Play on a team**

Participants were very enthusiastic about team sports. They enjoyed participating and developing friendships in sports as diverse as lacrosse, badminton and soccer. A few respondents felt left out of sports related activities because of their skill level, the skill levels of the other players, and because of the competitive nature of the sport. When asked about outdoor activities in general the participants often talked about their team sports.

- "I like to play soccer because it’s not really rough...you’re having fun, that’s the whole point of the game."
- "...baseball I like because you get to hit the ball and then like run around and make a lot of home runs."

**Follow a trail**

Hiking and biking were mentioned frequently as activities. There were suggestions to have more trails available and participants would like to have trails with curves and jumps (for mountain biking and motocross).
Catch a fish
During the focus groups, only two of the 72 participants mentioned fishing.

"The only time I'll go fishing is for the derby because if you catch a lot of fish you get a prize and stuff."

Celebrate your heritage
Many participants stated that family obligations for holidays prevent them from going outdoors. However, many of the youth mentioned that their families hold these celebrations outdoors with barbecues and picnics.

Discover California's past
No participants spoke about discovering California's past.

Results: Mail/Online Survey
The survey participants were asked several demographic questions. Of the 397 participants who completed a questionnaire, males and females were almost equally represented (males 52.6 percent, females 47.4 percent). Ages ranged from 12 to 17, with representation of all age groups. The respondents were mostly white (39.0 percent), Asian (24.9 percent), Hispanic/Latino of Mexican descent (19.5 percent), other Hispanic/Latino (4.5 percent), and black/African American (2.9 percent).

Youth respondents were asked to indicate their participation, before the age of 14, in the 10 COBR activities. At least 80 percent had played in the water, visited a California historical site/museum, followed a trail, explored nature outdoors, and learned to swim. The lowest participation rate was for catching a fish (58 percent). One in four subjects had not played on a team, celebrated their heritage, or gone camping overnight. The subjects often had opportunities to participate in COBR activities with friends, family, and organized groups. Reasons they did not participate in almost all activities were because they considered the activities to be boring or they had no interest in the activities.

Ninety percent of the subjects indicated that being too busy—with homework, after-school activities, chores, or work—was a factor that kept them from participating in outdoor activities in general. When given a choice, many respondents appear to prefer indoor activities to outdoor activities. Almost half of the respondents indicated that absence of someone within their family that participates in outdoor activities has prevented them from participation in these activities.

The Governor's Endorsement of the California COBR and other promotions
California Gov. Schwarzenegger endorsed COBR in a proclamation dated July 7, 2007. In his proclamation he states:

"Spending time in the great outdoors can be a wonderful experience for people of all ages, and this is especially true for our youth. Participating in outdoor activities is not only an enjoyable way for kids to get the exercise they need, it also helps them develop a greater appreciation for our magnificent environment."

The California Park and Recreation Commission also endorsed COBR in a resolution a month later and the California State Park Rangers Association voted to support the initiative at its 2007 conference.

The diverse appeal and application of COBR is evident in the diverse entities that have endorsed the initiative: the California Park and Recreation Society (with more than 100 member agencies), the California Council of YMCAs and the Pacific Stewardship Council. Public federal and state agency directors, comprising the prestigious California Biodiversity Council also recently endorsed COBR. Los Angeles, San Bernardino, San Mateo and San Luis Obispo counties and the East Bay Regional Park District and numerous cities are also on the list of endorsing agencies. Jurisdictions outside of California are enthusiastically embracing the COBR including the City of Seattle, the State of Connecticut and the New York Coast Guard. And the list is growing weekly. National support is evident in the presentations solicited by the Rocky Mountains State Parks, the National Trails Conference, the National Association of Recreation Resource Planners, and the National Park and Recreation Association.

Widespread Use
The Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights is a catalyst to further promote existing programs, support expansion of new programs and develop collaborations with other entities that can provide opportunities in the COBR. California State Parks launched a "Children in Nature Campaign" which includes organizing all 278 California State Parks units to illustrate opportunities for participating in the COBR activities and promoting "family friendly" public events. A Los Angeles County park, Santa Fe Dam, was recently
the site of a successful two-day event involving more than 11 different agencies, nonprofits, and community groups that collaborated so that over 150 youth from diverse backgrounds could enthusiastically participate in all 10 activities, proudly wearing their COBR T-shirts.

The California Parks Company used the COBR to develop the “Fit Kids” program (www.fitkids.us) that gives fun prizes to kids who complete all 10 activities. The Fit Kids program also promotes healthy food choices while recreating, and the website features videos of fun (and healthy) camp cooking tips for kids.

Conclusion

Activities in the COBR are reasonable and attainable for California youth. Many youth participate in several of the COBR activities. Boredom, safety, time, and level of interest appear to be constraints that limit participation. Enjoyment, interest, exercise, family and friends are reasons why these activities are popular.

Managers need to provide more activities within COBR for California youth in the context of safe and community friendly facilities. It is also important to explore programs designed to enhance interest (and decrease perceptions of boredom) regarding these activities, specifically for fishing, cultural heritage, and nature exploration. Safety is a predominant issue for both focus group and survey participants within the California Public Attitudes and Opinion Survey. The ability to participate in recreation and leisure activities is imperative for California’s youth and many currently lack a sense of safety and security in their local parks and recreation spaces. Specifically, issues related to gangs, drug use, and the homeless population impact the respondents’ sense of safety when recreating.

Managers could also consider providing access to outdoor recreation activities that involve youth with other family members. Many youth will be more likely to participate when they are alongside their families. Also, managers should attempt to provide outdoor activities that utilize technology. Rather than attempting to get youth to completely abandon technology and electronics in favor of outdoor activities, managers can offer outdoor activities that utilize technology, such as geo-caching, or that can be enhanced with technology, such as digital nature photo journals. Managers are apparently succeeding in the provision of camping, swimming, hiking, and team activities.

In a time when childhood obesity is on the rise and where the internet is replacing butterfly nets, COBR is an example of a program that offers benefits of the outdoors to children and their families. The COBR is an important communications tool that encourages renewal, focus, reinvigoration and a sense of wonder in the outdoors.

For More Information on COBR

The California Roundtable on Recreation, Parks and Tourism website (www.cal­roundtable.org) includes resources, such as flyers (in English and Spanish), sample certificates of completion, artwork, presentations in PowerPoint, and an ongoing list of endorsing agencies and organizations. The California State Parks website (Children in Nature link) www.parks.ca.gov/cinc contains additional resources and also an annotated reference and research library for further information. Communities and agencies within and outside of California are encouraged to utilize these resources as they develop COBR or similar programs that challenge the notion of the nature deficit child in society.

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References


