

NO SHORTAGE OF HALTON PARKS TO EXPLORE

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As COVID-19 disrupted normal daily routines and shut down public facilities like gyms and arenas in Halton Hills and across the region, residents gravitated to the natural world in droves.

Walking alone around the block or through the local park, however, became quite underwhelming after a few times out, said Fernandez, whose organization has seen a steady uptick in memberships; people seeking opportunities to stay fit outdoors, such as hiking, cycling and paddling.

"For many of our members, this is a change of lifestyle that they enjoy and will continue to enjoy even after COVID is but a cold, cruel memory," said Fer-



nandez.

Conservation Halton's multiple parks experienced approximately 150,000 more visitors in 2021 as compared to 2019.

"Nature has been such a big part of our community's pandemic experience. We believe it has changed peoples' views of the natural world for the better," said Mark Vytvytskyy, Conservation Halton COO.

Regardless of age or occupation, people are realizing that nature and the connection to it is so important to their physical and

mental well-being, said Vytvytskyy.

"Becoming more fit, having more energy and fitting into smaller sized clothing have been welcome byproducts after being shut down by COVID," said Fernandez.

Halton is rich in green-spaces that offer perfect year-round backdrops for hiking, mountain biking, skiing, snowshoeing and snowboarding.

"We had a huge uptake in mountain biking, a huge uptake in skiing lessons and in snowboarding lessons," said Vytvytskyy.

When Glen Eden ski hills were forced to close, CH introduced snowshoeing. The program was so successful that staff had to reach out to local vendors to help meet the huge demand for rentals.

"When you are sur-

rounded by nature, you are your true self, because there are no digital pieces. The way I look at nature, it allows you to almost cleanse yourself, cleanse your mind of things that affect your day-to-day. Everything in nature happens on its own and it's fascinating to realize that. To me, this resiliency of nature, the ability to bounce back, is unbelievable."

Nathalie Trepanier, who moved to Oakville in April of 2020, said she has always been an outdoorsy type, but "I have definitely upped my game."

"In the back of my condo, I saw trails and started walking during my lunch since I had to work from home for a few months," she said.

Cycling around Halton and hiking at Bronte Creek Provincial Park led to

membership in the HOC.

"All summer I cycled and hiked with the club; in the winter, I ski and snowshoe and hike as well. This has made my move and life in Oakville so much more enjoyable. It has helped my mental health as well."

It's always a good thing to meet different people and try different things, said Debra Owens, a former Oakville resident now living in Toronto, who ventures west to take advantage of Halton's outdoor spaces.

"It's always more fun to be with a group, pandemic or not, but particularly during the pandemic," said Owens.

Research by clinical psychologists suggests that it takes anywhere from 21 to 256 days to form new habits, and as we approach over 720 days since the be-

ginning of the pandemic, it's safe to say that people who have joined HOC have had more than sufficient time to crystallize their new activities into long-term habits, said Fernandez.

"Turns out you just can't get enough of nature. And it is habit forming," he added.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: As the pandemic forced many to abandon their usual recreational activities, people turned to the natural world for exercise and solace. We wanted to discover why, and if this trend of outdoor enthusiasts will last.



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