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New Laurier research collaboration probes health benefits of parks in Canada

WATERLOO – A new pan-Canadian research project will explore the impact of parks, protected areas and other recreational facilities on people’s health and well-being.

Supported by the Public Health Agency of Canada, the ParkSeek project brings together a diverse group of researchers and practitioners from academia, government, community groups and industry to gather and share information to understand how parks, protected areas and recreational facilities contribute to health behaviours and outcomes.

The research team, co-led by [Christopher Lemieux](#), the John McMurray Research Chair in Environmental Geography at Wilfrid Laurier University, and Jason Gilliland, director of Western’s Human Environments Analysis Lab, are quantifying the geographic accessibility to parks and protected areas across the country, investigating the quality of experiences in these spaces, and uncovering the policy barriers to equal participation in parks, protected areas and recreational opportunities.

“Protecting parks in Canada is good for our environment and our overall well-being,” said Jean-Yves Duclos, Minister of Health. “This project will help us better understand barriers to ensuring equal participation in parks, protected areas, and recreational opportunities for all. Together, with Western University and Wilfrid Laurier University, we will help improve health outcomes for Canadians.”

Parks are critically important, providing opportunities to connect with nature, pursue recreational activities and facilitate social connections for all ages.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenge for all, but perhaps one shining light is that it has revealed just how important nature is to human health and well-being,” said Lemieux, associate professor of Geography and Environmental Studies. “Millions of Canadians have flocked to parks for physical, mental and emotional well-being throughout the pandemic.

“The key challenge will be to find ways to maintain or even increase this engagement, and work to eliminate barriers so that all Canadians can access the benefits that nature provides. With recent commitments to protect 30 per cent of Canada’s land and waters by 2030 and to establish national urban parks in all provinces and territories, the project is timely and needed.”

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The team, which includes project coordinators Catherine Reining and Alexander (AJ) Wray, will focus some of its activities on 12 communities that provide a cross-section of Canada's vibrant diversity. These include:

North Vancouver, B.C.
Witset, B.C.
Dehcho Region, N.W.T.
Prince Albert, Sask.
Saskatoon
Winnipeg
Goderich, Ont.
London, Ont.
Whitchurch-Stouffville, Ont.
Montreal, Que.
Alma & Sackville, N.B.
Halifax

"We have built a cross-sectoral collaboration that involves academics from universities coast to coast to coast, all levels of government, non-profits, community groups, and industry that will have meaningful impacts on understanding and communicating the value of parks, protected areas and recreational facilities for health and well-being," said Gilliland.

Data generated from this project could be linked to other health and socio-economic indicators to understand how parks and recreational facilities contribute to population health, thus, providing new tools, technologies and approaches for public health action.

To learn more about the project and sign up to be notified when the project's activities launch later this year, please visit go.parkseek.ca

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