

Mental health and well-being impacts of inclusive park experiences on adults with disabilities and their caregivers

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An important step to facilitate conservation and respect of nature for all populations is to improve accessibility. In order to ensure access without impacting the wilderness—and to foster inclusion at the same time—Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation is developing and supporting programs that modify the user, not the environment, to accent the strengths of people in nature and promote park activities. Since launching several pilots in 2008, programs such as the Alberta Adaptive Nature Challenges have offered rich anecdotal evidence of the mental and physical health benefits of these inclusive nature activities.

In order to understand the benefits and applications of such nature interventions as part of an upstream mental health promotion strategy, however, research is crucial. In a first of many proposed studies, it has been found that inclusion in nature may indeed help improve mental health and wellbeing of adults with disabilities and their caregivers. These discoveries are the result of a 2012 study conducted by researchers from Mount Royal University in partnership with Alberta Parks-Kananaskis Region and the Alberta Addictions and Mental Health Research Partnership Program.

In this study, 70 participants ranging in age from 18-66 years, and reporting a variety of cognitive, development and physical (dis)abilities, engaged in day-trips in urban or mountain parks, week-end excursions in the front-country of Kananaskis, or week-long back-country camping adventures as the study interventions. The study used 3 surveys: a nature-wellbeing inventory, quality of life indicator measure and depression inventory to measure changes before and after the nature intervention. Participants were found to greatly benefit from the interventions in any setting or of any duration. Survey results revealed a trend towards improvement in symptoms of depressed mood, as well as greater health satisfaction, improved social relationships as well as improved satisfaction with a sense of community and experiences of helping. While results were recorded up to a week after the outing, they were thought to persist much longer in most cases. Participants also provided brief qualitative reflections on the experience during the nature experience. Qualitative accounts revealed important enhancements of sensory, social relationship and physical experiences through inclusive nature interventions; in the words of one participant: “nature is nurture.”