

Benton County Natural Areas & Parks
Outdoor Education & Recreation Program 5-Year Plan
Executive Summary



“Develop partnerships to support implementation of sustainable and adaptable outdoor education and recreation programs that provide annual opportunities within priority Benton County Natural Areas & Parks, with an emphasis on rural and underserved youth and their families”

-Outdoor Education & Recreation Planning Team

Adopted: April 2016

Executive Summary

The primary goal for the first Benton County Outdoor Education & Recreation Program is for staff, and local partners to have a roadmap for developing and supporting education and recreation programs within priority county parks. The Benton County Natural Areas & Parks Comprehensive Plan (updated in 2012), captured strong public support for an outdoor program. The voluntary planning team composed of local partners developed the vision and goals for the 5- year plan:

Goals & Outcomes

- ▲ Collaborate and build on existing natural resources education and recreation program efforts to consistently provide outdoor education and recreation programming within Benton County natural areas and parks;
- ▲ Provide safe settings and opportunities for new outdoor learning and recreation with an emphasis on equitable programming, to ensure access and participation for all Benton County families;
- ▲ Support community livability and health through active living opportunities and respect for the natural environment;
- ▲ Work with local/regional partners to gain collaborative funding and innovative program development, helping to ensure long term sustainability of outdoor education and recreation programs within Benton County.

Outcomes developed by the planning team included:

- ▲ Develop an outdoor education and recreation plan that focuses on existing efforts and strengthens partnerships with local and regional government, non-profits, and private organizations;
- ▲ Create a sustainable funding model through a mixture of general fund, grants, and revenue generation to enhance current and future outdoor education efforts;
- ▲ Guide the design and initiate creation of outdoor education/recreation activities that are suited to the attributes and capacity of priority parks;
- ▲ Increase and strengthen the partnerships with local/regional government, and non-profit organizations to increase outdoor education and recreation at county natural areas and parks;
- ▲ Provides consistent performance measures to track the success and evaluate plan progress.

The needs assessment section provides a ‘snapshot’ of the county landscape, and calls attention to what health issues are a priority for the county and program opportunities to address these. Important sociodemographic trends were identified including:

Community Needs

- ▲ Rapidly aging population;
- ▲ Declining youth outdoor recreation/education, and
- ▲ Increasingly diverse population.

Program actions to address these trends are supporting walking trails close to home, adapting to cultural needs, and promoting partnerships to increase participation. Most of the priority parks are located more than a half mile from most residents, making transportation the greatest barrier for residents to access these areas. Creating program activities, that provide transportation alternatives for this underserved population, will help address these issues and increase access and use of priority parks.

The 5-Year plan provides solutions for balancing current and future seasonal scheduling demands. Understanding and reducing scheduling conflicts that occur when staff is not notified about events is a priority. Building partnerships and communication to create and manage events, with advance scheduling is a priority. Conflicting uses can have negative outcomes on days where events impact reservation users and non-reservation users. There is also a concern for managing park capacity due to impacts on natural resources within the parks along with pressure on locations to accommodate all users. A program timeline has been created to address all of these major issues. This timeline will provide staff and local partners with ways to adapt all programs to more positively impact the community, while protecting park facilities and resources.

**Barriers &
Solutions**

The three major barriers to outdoor education/recreation participation include: transportation, funding and insurance. Due to the rural location of most parks, transportation is a major factor in use of priority parks. Funding is important to create alternative transportation and the ability for more programs, to better reach underserved populations close to home. Lastly, insurance requirements for program participants is described for the type of activities involved and the education or recreation program that is proposed. Insurance will be constantly evaluated to see if it fits within all needs and requirements.

**Path
Forward**

The use of public and local partner (providers of outdoor ed/rec) surveys helped to gather further information on current programming and where the county can support these efforts. Survey findings also provide county staff and partners with ideas for future work that can be completed within park areas or programs to increase user experience.