Everyday wild: How Edmonton’s urban parkland helps citizens thrive

Access to natural area parks within city limits provides therapeutic experiences, promotes health and well-being for residents.

By Katie Willis on March 5, 2019

A new study by University of Alberta researchers is taking a closer look at the experiences reported by natural area park-goers in Edmonton, finding that users report physical, spiritual and psychological benefits. The study, conducted by human geographers in the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, included photovoice interviews with 33 participants.

“Typical parks are not actually that biodiverse, but a natural area park creates a space for other creatures to thrive,” said Alison Cheesbrough, who conducted the study as part of her graduate studies. “Those spaces also help us to thrive. We found that natural areas facilitated connections to nature, self, companions, and others.”

Data was collected through photovoice, a participatory research method that combines participant photography with interviews. Photovoice allows the researcher to see through the participant’s eyes.

For Edmontonians, these results may come as no surprise. The city is home to the largest expanse of urban parkland in North America, with 20 major parks and more than 160 kilometres of trails that run along the North Saskatchewan River and surrounding tributaries. Unlike manicured parks, natural area parks prioritize the protection of the natural environment and processes—and are a point of pride for Edmontonians.

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“They are managed, but it is minimal management,” explained Cheesbrough. “If a tree falls across a trail it is moved to the side, but otherwise left. The paved trails in these parks are cleared of snow. This helps make these natural areas more accessible for everyone.”

Cheesbrough noted that the study found three common overarching elements to park-goers’ experiences. First, participants reported that parks helped them feel “away from the city” while in the middle of the city. Second, the entire experience of being in a natural area park is important. “Visits to the natural areas might promote any or all of the following: physical activity, relaxation, reduction of stress, connections to self, others, community, and nature,” said Cheesbrough. “The whole experience was greater than the sum of the parts.” Finally, the study found that when elements of urban life infiltrate natural area parks, such as litter, graffiti, or pet waste, the intrusions can cause discomfort for park visitors.

The most important finding, Cheesbrough explained, is the value that natural area parks bring to those who access them. “These spaces feel wild, they allow people to access the feeling of being somewhere wild and natural and they reported that feeling was important to them; it enriched their lives.”


Source: Faculty of Science