

Visitor use and satisfaction of the Meewasin Trail system in Saskatoon

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Abstract: A multi-use trail system, such as the Meewasin Valley Trail in Saskatoon, provides many recreational opportunities for both tourists and city residents. Such interaction between individuals and the environment is related to perception, values, and attitudes towards the environment. Factors such as culture and its related social and political aspects influence the 'person-environment' relationships that exist, and these in turn, influence behaviour towards recreational space. Constraints and conflicts are characteristic limitations that exist in recreational situations. This paper notes that consideration of the needs and desires of different individuals can improve recreational experiences. Preliminary survey results of Meewasin Valley Trail users suggest that there is a preference for natural surroundings, which should be maintained in order to provide a wilderness recreation resource within the city of Saskatoon.

Introduction

The Meewasin Valley Trail, situated along both sides of the South Saskatchewan River, provides many recreational opportunities for people in the Saskatoon area. The trail system is used by both visitors and city residents. Certain areas of the trail system appear to be used more heavily than others, while various modes of transportation are utilized by the trail users. Society's perceptions, values and attitudes have major roles in the selection of an individual's recreational space. It is important to consider the identity of trail users, as this is significant in terms of understanding the use and demands that are placed upon the trail system.

Environmental Perception and Behavioural Research

The environment plays an important role in outdoor recreation. Whether it is in its natural form or modified by human action, it is viewed as a contribution to most recreational experiences. Most forms of recreation involve the interaction of an individual with others and the environment (Wall 1989).

Environmental perception and behavioural research study the geography of space and place, and require knowledge of how people experience, perceive, organise and attribute meaning to environmental information, as well as the individual's actions taken upon this information (Aitken *et al.* 1989). Problems may result from the use of the recreational resource base. Concern for the quality of a recreational experience contributes to the physical and mental well-being of recreation participants (Pigram 1983). The environment and its users have a reciprocal relationship. In order to maintain participant satisfaction, environmental values should not be used at a faster rate than they can be produced.

The concept of carrying capacity is concerned with the capability of the resource base to continue to provide for recreational use (Pigram 1983). While ecological aspects are important, the social component is of particular relevance to outdoor recreation. The social realm involves individual tolerance levels and sensitivity to others, as these aspects are personal and subjective notions that are linked to human psychological and behavioural characteristics. These aspects are the most difficult to measure, as they differ between individuals, as well as for an individual at different times or situations (Pigram 1983).

Recreation and Behavioural Responses

Those individuals who do not participate in recreational activities may be categorized as those who do not desire to participate, and those for whom a certain constraint exists (Searle and Jackson 1985). External constraints, existing outside the person or that are characteristic of the environment, may take the form of trail supply and availability, and costs in travel and fees. Non-participation may also include internal constraints within the person,

including perceptions related to personal capacities, knowledge, resources, and interest.

Incompatibility and the resulting conflicts between opposing recreationists, as well as between outdoor recreation and other forms of resource use, may detract from the enjoyment of a recreational experience (Pigram 1983). Incompatibility depends upon the degree to which two or more activities can co-exist in a certain recreational area. Confrontation over the use of recreational space is not due only to inter-activity conflict. Different types of participants that engage in the same activity may also experience conflict situations, due to the complexities of human behaviour (Pigram 1983).

An 'outgroup' may be identified as a group to which an individual does not belong. Unfavourable evaluations of an outgroup lead to attributions of conflict when the outgroup is encountered. There appears to be a tendency to evaluate others upon the basis of group membership, and when recreation users are asked to make judgements about goal interference, the responses may be based upon beliefs about the outgroup, rather than what has been experienced (Ramthun 1995).

Survey of Meewasin Valley Trail Users

The Meewasin Valley Trail, developed in 1982, encompasses over 15 kilometers of asphalt paths and several kilometers of other trails, along both sides of the South Saskatchewan River. It is a multi-use path that is available for recreational enjoyment throughout the year. Due to increased trail demand, it was found that a more comprehensive look at the trail system was needed and that future development was inevitable. Previous research of the trail system has been concerned with the environmental impacts of trail use (Hilderman *et.al* 1990; Beak Associates 1988; Golder Associates 1985). Social aspects are unknown, including the amount of trail use, the frequency of use in various areas, the modes of transportation that are used, and the benefits of the trail system to the residents of Saskatoon. These

social impacts would not only include the positive aspects of the trail system, but would also involve any negative spin-offs that may result from increased trail use. It would be beneficial to determine whether the expectations by the public are being met by the current trail system, or whether there are any concerns that may demand increased trail access.

During the summer months of 1998, a preliminary study was conducted by utilizing trail-side surveys. The views of trail users were recorded in response to a short questionnaire. These surveys included the following areas of interest: where the person came from to use the trail, why the trail was being used, where the trail was entered, how far was travelled to get to the trail, level of activity while using the trail, frequency of trail use, areas of improvement, and likes or dislikes about the trail. A longer survey, dealing with the same areas of interest, will be mailed out to a sample of the residents of Saskatoon in order to reach both trail users and non-users.

Three main areas of concern were examined in the scope of the study. First, the types of use or modes of transportation were considered, as well as the areas of the trail system that were most frequently used. Secondly, the social and economic impacts or benefits to the community were investigated, relating trail use to the areas of the trail system that were most frequently used. A third area of study involved the impact of the trail system on the community and the identification of any negative impacts.

Initial determinations were made, based upon the works of Jackson (1988) and Bialeschki and Henderson (1988). First, it may be suggested that the further one must travel to use the trail system, the frequency of trail use declines, while non-pedestrian forms of transportation must be utilized. Secondly, the downtown core would receive the most trail use that would mainly involve tourists and business people. The outlying areas would receive the least use, mainly by people living in the most closely associated residential areas, or by athletic types. Thirdly, in terms of negative aspects, any major environmental impact that occurs would be found away from the paved primary path, while safety concerns would be an issue in high traffic areas.

Results

Of the sample of one hundred trail users, 78% indicated that they had come from home to use the Meewasin Valley Trail. The rest of the users had either come from school (4%), work (10%), or another place (8%). Of those in the “other” category, 5% were visiting the city. Many of the respondents intended to enter and leave the trail from the same spot (64%), while 25% used a different entrance and exit point. The others (11%) indicated that their route was undecided.

The majority of trail users did not travel far in order to use the Meewasin Valley Trail. Thirty-two percent travelled less than three blocks, and 27% travelled between 3 and 8 blocks. Of those who came from a further location, 34% travelled over 9 blocks, and 7% were from out of town. The respondents indicated that just over fifty percent of Saskatoon’s neighbourhoods were represented, and that the areas of residence were fairly evenly distributed across the city. The main form of transportation to the trail (Table 1) was by foot (41%).

Table 1: Mode of transportation to trail.

Walk	41%
Cycle	33%
Car	17%
Public transit	1%
Other:	8%
rollerblading (3%)	
running (3%)	
powerchair/handicycle (2%)	

Many individuals (41%) indicated that they would be using the trail between a half an hour and an hour on the day of the survey (Table 2).

Table 2: *Length of time utilizing trail.*

Less than half an hour	7%
Half an hour to one hour	41%
One to one and a half hours	27%
Over one and a half hours	25%

It was indicated that 71% of trail users used the trails more than once a week (Table 3). Of those respondents, 26% indicated use occurred more than twice a week.

Table 3: *Average use of trails.*

Once a month	7%
Once each two weeks	7%
Less than once a week	7%
Once a week	8%
More than once a week	71%

Many respondents indicated that the scenery, serenity, and the proximity to the river were the most attractive aspects of the trails (Table 4). Of things that were liked the least, crowded conditions (especially downtown), bikes and rollerblades, and high speeds of bikes were the most common concerns (Table 4). Many individuals indicated that they would not change anything about the trails, and that it should be kept natural (Table 5). If they were asked to change anything, it was suggested that the trails be extended and developed to a further extent, and that the trails should be widened (Table 5).

Table 4: *Favourite and least favourite aspects of the trail system.*

Favourite aspects (%)	Least favourite aspects (%)
Natural scenery/wildlife (39%)	Trail design (26%)
Proximity to river (13%)	Outgroup related (26%)
Provides serenity (10%)	Upkeep (22%)
Trail design (7%)	Crowding (12%)
No traffic/not crowded (6%)	Other (5%)
Vegetation (5%)	Safety (4%)
Access (4%)	Nothing (4%)
Provides place for exercise (4%)	Distance from home (1%)
Upkeep of trails (4%)	
Other (8%)	

Table 5: *Trail improvements*

Items to remain the same (%)	Desired changes (%)
Natural beauty/vegetation (43%)	More maintenance (21%)
Everything (28%)	Extend trails (18%)
Paths, all types (9%)	Widen trails (13%)
Maintenance (8%)	Nothing (12%)
Proximity to river (5%)	Rules/more signs (9%)
Other (4%)	Safety (8%)
Not overdeveloped (3%)	Less bikes/separate trail (6%)
	More water fountains (5%)
	More washrooms (5%)
	Other (3%)

Conclusion

It is apparent that the initial suggestions of recreational behaviour are fairly accurate. Those individuals using the trail could access the trails fairly easily from their neighbourhood. The downtown area was used quite frequently, and the crowds in this area were noted to be a concern. The trails were enjoyed by most of the respondents, as they provide a place to enjoy nature within the City of Saskatoon.

Environment is important in terms of a person's perception, values and attitudes, which in turn influence the individual's choice of recreational space. Constraints and conflicts also play a major role in an individual's selection of recreational activity and the location of such an activity. Consideration of the needs and desires of different individuals in society will allow for more specific improvements of recreational experiences.

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