



# **Rapid Review for the National Framework for Recreation in Canada**

## **Framework Renewal Recommendations**

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# Rapid Review for the National Framework for Recreation in Canada

The full rapid review was commissioned by the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA) to support the renewal of the National Framework for Recreation in Canada, originally finalized in 2015. The Framework Leadership Team (FLT), comprised of professionals from the recreation and parks sector across Canada, was tasked with guiding this renewal process, ensuring the Framework remains relevant and responsive to contemporary challenges and opportunities. This rapid review provides an overview of the academic and grey literature published since 2015 (with the inclusion of seminal sources where applicable) across six critical themes: (1) Community Health & Wellbeing; (2) Equity & Social Responsibility; (3) Operational Excellence & Safety; (4) Resilience & Sustainability; (5) Social Infrastructure; and (6) Tourism & Economic Impact. These themes were established by analyzing documents focused on future trends of sport, physical activity and recreation, some of which informed the Framework for Recreation in Canada Update (2024). There were a number of themes in the documents which were synthesized into six overall themes. While the review offers key insights and evidence-informed findings to guide the renewal process, please be advised it has been conducted within a condensed timeframe and therefore aims to provide a broad overview rather than an exhaustive or deeply analytical examination of each theme. It should also be noted that only resources available in English were reviewed.

This document includes only the Recommendations for the Renewal of the Framework, organized by the six themes. The full Rapid Review can be found at [www.cpra.ca/framework](http://www.cpra.ca/framework).

## Theme One: Community Health and Wellbeing in Recreation and Parks

Four key areas are explored within the theme of Community Health and Wellbeing: (1) Physical Health Benefits; (2) Mental Health Benefits; (3) Social Connectedness; and (4) Spiritual and Holistic Health.

### Theme One Conclusion

Recreation plays a multidimensional role in promoting community health and wellbeing by enhancing physical fitness, supporting mental health, fostering social connections, and nurturing spiritual and holistic health. Importantly, the recreation and parks sector plays a crucial role in multi-sectoral health initiatives, such as mental health group hiking programs (Barnes et al., 2023). These programs leverage parks to promote physical activity and mental health, demonstrating the sector's relevance to public health.

### Recommendations for updating the National Framework:

- 1** *Expand the Framework's Scope on Health and Well-being:* Include actionable strategies for leveraging recreation and parks to address mental health challenges, particularly through nature-based solutions and social programs. Highlight the therapeutic benefits of recreational activities in reducing loneliness, enhancing social connectedness, and fostering resilience during times of crisis, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 2** *Emphasize Equity and Accessibility:* Highlight strategies to ensure recreation opportunities are inclusive and accessible to all, addressing barriers faced by marginalized communities.
- 3** *Leverage Emerging Trends:* Integrate evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic underscoring the importance of outdoor and nature-based recreation in fostering resilience and mental health.
- 4** *Advance Holistic Approaches:* Acknowledge the growing demand for spiritual and holistic health opportunities.

## Theme Two: Equity and Social Responsibility

Three key areas are explored within the theme of Equity and Social Responsibility: (1) Social Justice and Inclusion – Integrating equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging in programming and policy; (2) Indigenous Reconciliation – Responding to Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls to action, building partnerships with Indigenous communities; and (3) Addressing Homelessness – Role of recreation spaces in supporting individuals experiencing homelessness.

### Theme Two Conclusion

Equity and social responsibility are fundamental pillars in fostering inclusive, accessible, and community-oriented recreation and parks services across Canada. The review highlights that while significant strides have been made toward embedding EDI in programming and policy, gaps remain in dismantling systemic barriers and addressing structural inequities. Indigenous reconciliation in recreation spaces requires ongoing commitment to decolonization, Indigenous-led partnerships, and transformative policy shifts that prioritize Indigenous rights and knowledge. Additionally, the role of recreation spaces in supporting individuals experiencing homelessness underscores the importance of trauma-informed, inclusive design and programming that balances diverse needs. Moving forward, it is essential to adopt comprehensive strategies that address these issues holistically, ensuring recreation and park services remain equitable and socially responsible.

### Recommendations for updating the National Framework:

- 1** *Embed EDI Principles Across Strategic Goals:* Update the Framework to explicitly incorporate EDI as cross-cutting priorities. Develop measurable benchmarks to assess progress in reducing systemic barriers and increasing access for equity-deserving groups.
- 2** *Commit to Indigenous Reconciliation:* Align more explicitly with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, emphasizing Indigenous leadership in recreation planning and operations. Promote Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs) and the integration of Indigenous knowledge into recreation policies and practices.
- 3** *Address Economic Barriers Through Pricing Policies:* Promote equitable pricing strategies in recreation services to ensure economic accessibility for low-income populations.
- 4** *Foster Multicultural Integration:* Emphasize the importance of culturally relevant programming and marketing strategies that align with Canada's diverse population. Support municipalities in integrating multicultural approaches to parks and recreation planning and programming.

- 5 Advance Research and Data Collection: Encourage partnerships with academic institutions to collect and disseminate data on equity and social responsibility in recreation.

By integrating these recommendations, the National Framework for Recreation in Canada can evolve to reflect contemporary societal challenges and priorities, ensuring that recreation spaces and services are inclusive, equitable, and socially responsible.

### **Theme Three: Operational Excellence and Safety**

Four key areas are explored within the theme of Operational Excellence and Safety: (1) Delivery Capacity and Workforce – Recruitment, training, and retention of a skilled workforce and volunteer base; (2) Technology in Recreation – Digital solutions and tools for enhanced user experience and operational efficiency; (3) Safety and Safe Sport – Ensuring safe participation, safeguarding against abuse, and building trust; and (4) Surveillance and monitoring.

#### **Theme Three Conclusion**

Theme Three underscores the critical importance of operational excellence and safety in the recreation and parks sector. Addressing workforce challenges, harnessing the potential of digital technologies, ensuring safety for all participants, and considering the ethical implications of surveillance are pivotal to the sector's growth and inclusivity. As the recreation landscape continues to evolve, the need for comprehensive strategies to enhance workforce capacity, improve user engagement, safeguard participants, and balance safety with privacy concerns becomes increasingly evident. The following recommendations for updating the national framework reflect these priorities and provide actionable steps to strengthen the sector in the face of emerging challenges and opportunities.

## Recommendations for updating the National Framework:

- 1** *Address Workforce Challenges:* Propose national strategies to strengthen workforce recruitment and retention, particularly in rural and northern communities. Advocate for training programs on cultural competency, safeguarding practices, and innovative program delivery methods, including the use of emerging technologies.
- 2** *Leverage Technology:* Advocate for equitable access to digital tools and promote the integration of emerging technologies to enhance user experience and operational efficiency.
- 3** *Integrate Equity-Focused Evaluation Metrics:* Update the Framework to include equity-focused evaluation practices as a core component. Develop guidance for municipalities on tracking and reporting metrics such as accessibility for marginalized populations, inclusion in programming, and regional service disparities. Providing tools and resources for equity-centered evaluations will align recreation services with Canada's commitments to diversity and inclusion.
- 4** *Enhance Capacity for Evaluation:* Train recreation and parks professionals to conduct program evaluation to build the sector's capacity to evaluate and monitor more effectively.
- 5** *Foster Community-University Partnerships for Capacity Building:* Promote partnerships between municipalities and academic institutions to build evaluation expertise and foster innovation. These collaborations can provide access to advanced methodologies, support training programs, and facilitate research to address gaps in data quality and analysis. Including case studies and templates for successful partnerships in the Framework can serve as a model for replication across Canada.

By embedding these recommendations into the updated National Framework, the recreation and parks sector will be better equipped to deliver transparent, evidence-based services that meet the evolving needs of diverse Canadian communities.

## Theme Four: Resilience & Sustainability

Two key areas are explored within the theme of Resilience & Sustainability: (1) Climate Adaptation in Recreation Spaces – Ensuring facilities and green spaces are resilient to climate impacts; and (2) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – How recreation aligns with the SDGs, from health and wellbeing to sustainable cities and communities.

### Theme Four Conclusion

The theme of Resilience and Sustainability underscores the importance of addressing environmental, social, and economic challenges to ensure the long-term viability of parks and recreation services in Canada. Climate change adaptation, sustainable infrastructure planning, fostering community resilience, and developing financial sustainability strategies are essential components of a resilient recreation system. Moving forward, parks and recreation departments must prioritize these areas, implementing strategies that ensure public spaces are adaptable, inclusive, and financially secure.

### Recommendations for updating the National Framework:

- 1** *Embed Resilience and Sustainability:* Prioritize climate adaptation by promoting green infrastructure, energy-efficient facilities, and community-based environmental stewardship. Position recreation spaces as critical elements of urban resilience, aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) like SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).
- 2** *Promote Sustainable Infrastructure:* Advocate for the use of green infrastructure and energy-efficient design in recreation spaces to reduce environmental impacts and enhance sustainability.
- 3** *Strengthen Community Resilience:* Foster social cohesion and community engagement through inclusive recreation programs that promote wellbeing and build social capital.
- 4** *Enhance Financial Sustainability:* Support the development of innovative funding models, diversify revenue sources, and prioritize cost-efficient operational practices to ensure long-term financial viability.
- 5** *Incorporate the parks and recreation sector's contribution to the SDGs:* aligning the work of parks and recreation to the SDGs will highlight the sector's role in important intersectoral national and international goals.

These recommendations will help update the National Framework, ensuring that parks and recreation services in Canada are resilient, sustainable, and capable of meeting the evolving needs of communities.

## **Theme Five: Social Infrastructure for Recreation**

Three key areas are explored within the theme of Social Infrastructure for Recreation: (1) Indoor Spaces and Facilities – Accessibility, modernization, and inclusivity in design; (2) Outdoor/Nature-Based Spaces – Parks, trails, and green spaces that promote connection to nature; and (3) Community Design and Placemaking – Creating inclusive, adaptable, and attractive spaces for gathering and recreation.

### **Theme Five Conclusion**

Social infrastructure for recreation plays a critical role in fostering equitable, inclusive, and resilient communities across Canada. Through well-designed indoor spaces, thoughtfully maintained and innovative outdoor/nature-based spaces, and dynamic approaches to community design and placemaking, municipalities can strengthen the physical, social, and cultural well-being of residents. Modernizing indoor facilities with universal design principles, advancing sustainability goals, and integrating new technologies ensures these spaces remain accessible and adaptable to diverse needs. Similarly, outdoor spaces that prioritize nature connection, biodiversity, and innovative design offer essential opportunities for public health and social interaction. Finally, community design and placemaking strategies that focus on inclusivity, adaptability, and ongoing engagement create gathering spaces that reflect local identities while addressing structural barriers to participation. Moving forward, collaboration, innovation, and equity-based approaches will be pivotal to ensuring that recreation infrastructure serves as a cornerstone of vibrant, connected, and healthy communities.

## Recommendations for updating the National Framework:

- 1** *Advance Universal Design Principles in Indoor Facilities:* Ensure all indoor recreation spaces adhere to accessibility standards and universal design, including sensory-friendly environments and culturally inclusive features to serve diverse communities.
- 2** *Prioritize Sustainability and Innovation:* Encourage the adoption of energy-efficient systems, smart technologies, and LEED certification in recreation facility upgrades to meet environmental goals and operational needs.
- 3** *Promote Nature-Based Recreation Opportunities:* Expand investment in parks, trails, and green spaces that emphasize biophilic design, rewilding, and biodiversity to support environmental resilience and public well-being.
- 4** *Integrate Technology for Smart Outdoor Spaces:* Implement smart park technologies such as real-time monitoring, app-based amenities, and energy-efficient features to enhance accessibility, safety, and user engagement.
- 5** *Foster Equity-Based Placemaking Initiatives:* Develop adaptable and inclusive public spaces through continuous community engagement, equitable programming, and place-based approaches that reflect the needs of racialized, Indigenous, and underserved populations.
- 6** *Support Flexible and Multi-Use Community Spaces:* Invest in adaptable infrastructure, such as seasonal spaces and multi-purpose facilities, to ensure recreation spaces can evolve with shifting community demographics and priorities.
- 7** *Enhance Partnerships and Collaborative Models:* Leverage partnerships with community organizations, private entities, and cultural stakeholders to improve funding, programming, and the co-creation of inclusive recreational spaces.
- 8** *Embed Reconciliation and Indigenous Knowledge:* Prioritize Indigenous-led design, planning, and stewardship in outdoor and nature-based spaces to align recreation infrastructure with Canada's commitments to reconciliation.
- 9** *Ensure Ongoing Monitoring and Innovation:* Establish mechanisms for evaluating the use, accessibility, and impact of recreation spaces, while fostering innovation through research, pilot projects, and knowledge-sharing initiatives.

- 10 *Address Barriers to Participation:* Focus on reducing systemic barriers to recreational access, such as cost, transportation, and cultural inclusivity, particularly in marginalized and newcomer communities.

By integrating these recommendations, the updated National Framework can better position recreation infrastructure as a foundation for social connection, environmental stewardship, and equitable community development.

## **Theme Six: Tourism Development & Economic Impact**

Two key areas are explored within the theme of Tourism and Economic Impact: (1) Tourism Development – Opportunities to attract visitors through recreational assets; and (2) Economic Benefits – Contributions of recreation to local economies, job creation, and quality of life improvements.

### **Theme Six Conclusion**

Recreation serves as a powerful driver of tourism and economic impact, offering substantial benefits to communities through increased visitation, job creation, and enhanced quality of life. By leveraging recreational assets, such as parks, trails, events, and cultural amenities, municipalities can attract visitors, stimulate local economies, and position themselves as thriving destinations. Investments in recreational infrastructure, strategic partnerships, and tourism promotion further amplify these benefits, creating resilient, sustainable, and economically vibrant communities. Recognizing the interconnected nature of recreation, tourism, and economic development is essential for fostering inclusive growth and long-term prosperity.

## Recommendations for updating the National Framework:

- 1** *Promote Nature-Based Tourism Opportunities:* Encourage investment in parks, trails, and waterfronts to attract visitors seeking outdoor recreation experiences, emphasizing the dual benefits of tourism development and environmental sustainability. Incorporate strategies to integrate nature-based solutions (NBS) that address climate change while enhancing the appeal of recreational assets.
- 2** *Leverage Event-Based Tourism:* Expand support for cultural festivals, recreational tournaments, and e-sports events as drivers of tourism, particularly in rural and smaller communities. Develop guidelines for municipalities to maximize economic and social benefits from event-based tourism while fostering regional identities.
- 3** *Expand Recreational Trails and Infrastructure:* Prioritize the development of interconnected trail systems and recreational infrastructure to boost local economies and improve accessibility for diverse populations. Support multi-use trails and greenways as key elements of tourism routes, particularly in remote or rural areas, to encourage sustainable economic growth.
- 4** *Encourage Collaborative Tourism Strategies:* Promote partnerships among municipalities, tourism agencies, and local businesses to enhance marketing, infrastructure development, and visitor services. Establish collaborative governance frameworks to ensure equitable stakeholder engagement and clear strategic goals for tourism initiatives.
- 5** *Highlight the Economic Contributions of Recreation:* Emphasize the role of recreational investments in stimulating entrepreneurial activity, job creation, and community development. Advocate for data collection on the economic impact of parks and recreation to strengthen evidence-based decision-making.
- 6** *Enhance Community Livability through Recreation:* Position recreation amenities as vital to improving quality of life, which attracts businesses, residents, and skilled workers to communities. Incorporate evidence linking recreational spending to health and economic savings into municipal and provincial policy frameworks.
- 7** *Focus on Resilience and Economic Sustainability:* Promote recreation as a mechanism for economic resilience, particularly in rural and underserved areas, by linking tourism and recreation strategies to long-term sustainability goals. Develop policies that recognize the role of recreational assets in reducing healthcare costs through improved physical and mental health outcomes.

- 8 *Integrate Accessibility and Inclusivity in Tourism Development: Ensure recreational assets and tourism infrastructure are accessible to individuals of all abilities, with inclusive design as a core priority in planning and development.*
- 9 *Support Marketing and Branding Initiatives: Foster destination branding that emphasizes the unique recreational opportunities and cultural heritage of communities to attract diverse visitor demographics.*
- 10 *Facilitate Knowledge Sharing and Research: Encourage ongoing research on the economic impacts of recreation and tourism and share best practices among municipalities and stakeholders. Provide training and resources to help municipalities understand and leverage the potential of recreation-driven tourism in local economic development.*

# Conclusion

This rapid review underscores the transformative role of recreation and parks in addressing contemporary challenges and opportunities across Canada. By enhancing physical and mental health, fostering social connectedness, supporting economic development, and promoting environmental sustainability, the sector remains pivotal to community wellbeing. However, emerging issues like workforce shortages, climate adaptation, and equity barriers require strategic updates to the National Framework for Recreation in Canada.

To remain relevant and impactful, the Framework must reflect these evolving dynamics by embedding inclusivity, resilience, and sustainability into its strategic goals. This includes prioritizing Indigenous reconciliation, leveraging digital transformation, and positioning recreation as a cornerstone of economic and social recovery. By integrating these evidence-based recommendations, the Framework can effectively guide the recreation and parks sector in creating equitable, vibrant, and resilient communities for generations to come.