

**LOOK AT LEISURE BULLETIN #47**  
**“The Road Well-Travelled and the Road Ahead”**

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## **Introduction**

The *Alberta Recreation Survey* has been conducted every four years since 1981. The six surveys in the series, provide a wealth of data about how Albertans take part in recreation. This bulletin takes the data from each survey and presents a summary of participation trends that are now evident. Also presented is an overview of the larger trends expected to influence the demand for and delivery of recreation services in the future.

Preparing for the future is a daunting task for any public agency charged with providing programs and services to meet public need. Being able to meet future demand requires an understanding of changes not only in the activities people enjoy during their leisure time, but also more generally in society, the economy, the political environment, and the technological environment.

Trend assessment is an inexact science and what is forecast for the future may well not materialize. However, Hunter (2003) has shown that while some forecasts from the 1980s have not proven to be accurate for the 1990s, others have held true. It is for this reason that an understanding of the relationship between recreation data and broader societal events needs to be carefully considered in recreation planning.

## **Participation in Recreation and Changing Preferences, 1981 – 2000**

### Activity Preferences

Over the past 20 years since the start of the *Alberta Recreation Survey*, various changes in participation and preferred activities have been observed. These changes are considered in this edition of *A Look at Leisure*, along with a review of larger societal and economic trends that might influence participation patterns in the future.

By rank of household participation, the top 5 activities have remained largely unchanged between 1981 and 2000 with walking being the most popular activity (Table 1). The most noticeable change concerns household participation in dancing which was ranked third in 1981 but which had fallen to 13<sup>th</sup> in 1992, and no longer appears among the top 15 activities in 2000. Biking has had more positive change, increasing from 8<sup>th</sup> in 1981 to a high point of 2<sup>nd</sup> in 1992 and 1996 before slipping back to 6<sup>th</sup> in 2000. By 2000, then, it is clear that Albertans enjoy activities that get them outside (walking and gardening), experiencing cultural opportunities and, when not being a direct participant, watching others.

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**Table 1**  
**Most Popular Activities By Rank**  
**Household Participation 1981 to 2000**

Survey Year											
1981		1984		1988		1992		1996		2000	
Activity	Rank	Activity	Rank	Activity	Rank	Activity	Rank	Activity	Rank	Activity	Rank
Walking	1	Walking	1	Walking	1	Walking	1	Walking	1	Walking	1
Crafts	2	Gardening	2	Gardening	2	Biking	2	Biking	2	Gardening	2
Dancing	3	Crafts	3	Crafts	3	Spectator	3	Crafts	3	Visit galleries, museums	3
Spectator	4	Spectator	4	Visit galleries, museums	4	Swim in a pool	4	Gardening	4	Crafts	4
Gardening	5	Biking	5	Spectator	5	Crafts	5	Spectator	5	Spectator	5
Visit galleries, museums	5	Visit galleries, museums	6	Biking	5	Visit galleries, museums	6	Swim in a pool	6	Biking	6
Camping	7	Dancing	7	Swim in a pool	7	Camping	7	Visit galleries, museums	7	Attend festivals	6
Biking	8	Attend educational courses	8	Camping	8	Picnicking in countryside	7	Video & computer games	8	Swim in a pool	8
Ice skating	9	Camping	9	Picnicking in countryside	8	Ice skating	9	Camping	9	Video & computer games	9
Fishing	10	Ice skating	10	Fishing	10	Golf	10	Golf	10	Camping	10
Jogging	11	Video & computer games	11	Dancing	11	Attend educational courses	10	Picnicking in countryside	11	Golf	11
Drama	12	Fishing	11	Ice skating	12	Video & computer games	12	Attend educational courses	12	Attend educational courses	11
Video & computer games	13	Jogging	13	Attend educational courses	12	Dancing	13	Ice skating	13	Picnicking in countryside	13
Bowling	14	Drama	13	Golf	14	Fishing	13	Picnicking in city	14	Day hiking	14
Aerobics	15	Aerobics	15	Video & computer games	15	Swim in a lake	15	Day hiking	15	Drama	15
Baseball & softball	15	Baseball & softball	15							Picnicking in city	15
										Aerobics	15

Other notable changes include the rise of golf from outside the top 15 before 1988 to 14<sup>th</sup> in that year’s survey, 10<sup>th</sup> in 1992 and 1996 and 11<sup>th</sup> in 2000. This pattern clearly reflects the massive increase in golfing opportunities in Alberta between 1988 and 1996 and the access these provided to participants of all skill levels.

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The change in access to opportunities is also evident in participation in video and computer games. Much improved technology and relatively affordable prices has significantly improved access to these activities at home and resulted in a rise from 13<sup>th</sup> rank in 1981 to 9<sup>th</sup> in 2000.

### Participation Rates

The rank order of activities reflects the overall involvement Albertans have with recreation. A closer look at the rates of participation for individual activities over the last 20 years reveals further useful information about the preferences of Albertans.

Between 1981 and 2000, 48 activities experienced decreases in participation with seven remaining the same and nine experiencing increases. The largest decrease has affected dancing which attracted 77% of Albertans in 1981 but by 2000 participation had declined to 34%. Another notable decline was experienced by jogging for which participation in 1981 was 54% but by 2000 the rate was 33%, perhaps reflecting the greater availability of fitness centres and the greater variety of fitness opportunities these offer beyond just jogging. The integration of jogging with other fitness activities may be helping to rekindle participation as participation rates have begun to recover since 1992 when participation hit its lowest point at 28%.

Other notable declines since 1981 include:

- tennis: from 31% in 1981 to 13% in 2000
- curling: 26% to 15%
- bowling: 43% to 23%
- baseball/softball: 42% to 22%
- hunting: 28% to 9%
- fishing: 55% to 32%
- football: 24% to 9%
- cross-country skiing: 31% to 17%
- ice skating: 58% to 34%
- ice hockey: 28% to 18%
- racquetball: 28% to 5%.

This list of activities tends to represent “traditional” activities, or activities that might typically be associated with Albertans. In the 20 years that has passed since 1981, a much greater variety of activities has become accessible and the choice to do other activities has led to reductions in participation for other activities. Furthermore, Albertans feel they have less time available for recreation and have switched to activities that are more time efficient and easier to fit in busy schedules, or have stopped taking part in activities which require more structured environments, such as courts, fields or tracks.

Perhaps of greater significance is the change in participation rates observed between 1992 and 2000. Unlike the downturn in the Alberta economy during the late 1980s, the 1990s has seen an economic recovery and encouraged Albertans to continue their participation in recreation and

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leisure activities. This is reflected among those activities that have experienced increased participation, as well as those experiencing decreases but for which such decreases have been at a slower rate than during the 1980s. Some notable examples from the *Alberta Recreation Survey* include:

- being a spectator had declined to 58% by 1992 but had increased to 62% by 2000;
- bowling, which decreased rapidly between 1981 and 1988 but for which the rate of participation decreased by just 1% between 1992 and 2000;
- fishing declined to 39% in 1992 from 55% in 1981, but since 1992 the participation rate declined at a slower rate to 32% in 2000;
- tennis, for which participation levels decreased from 31% to 18% between 1981 and 1992 but for which the rate of decline slowed during the 1990s with an overall decline in participation of 5% to the 2000 level of 13%;
- hunting for which participation has decreased from 15% to 9% during the 1990s after declining at twice that rate during the 1980s.

So, the 1990s have been a period of recovery and stabilization, perhaps reflecting economic and social trends that have seen improved opportunities for accessing recreation and a greater willingness to participate. At the same time, some activities (e.g. tennis, fishing, hunting) may have lost their mass appeal and may now be attracting only the most committed of participants.

Since 1992, the most noticeable increase in participation has been observed for visiting museums and galleries which has increased from 47% in 1992 to 72% in 2000. Crafts and hobbies have experienced an increase from 54% to 68%, with video and computer games also increasing from 40% to 52%. Each of these activities can be characterized as being quite passive, with the latter two being more likely to be home-based than away-from-home.

Other notable increases in participation since 1992 have been observed for:

- golf: 41% to 47%
- attending educational courses: 41% to 47%
- day hiking: 31% to 38%
- aerobics: 30% to 36%
- weight training: 27% to 33%
- soccer: 15% to 23%

Three primary factors can be associated with these increases. First, an increasing concern with personal health and well-being is driving participation in activities such as aerobics and weight training. Second, the baby-boom group has started families and are looking for relatively inexpensive individual and group activities, such as day hiking and soccer. Third, the interest in personal development, recognition of the value of educational upgrading at various levels, and acceptance of the notion that learning is a life-long activity, fuels participation in courses. In addition, activities such as aerobics, weight training and day hiking can be undertaken without

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formal program structures and schedules, and can meet the desire for flexible access to opportunities.

Influential Trends on Future Recreation

The 1980s and 1990s have been characterized by a range of changes which have affected how Albertans take part in recreation and the types of recreation they take part in. The summary of survey data presented above is testament to some of these shifts. Some of the key trends that are regularly noted include:

- an aging population, with the Baby Boom generation passing 50;
- greater interest in individualized activities and activities which are family-oriented;
- the constraint of time and the greater value placed on leisure time;
- the growth and diversity of the Alberta economy and the influence of this on population migration from across Canada and elsewhere;
- an increasing role of private partners in public ventures;
- the appearance of specialized niche programming to meet demands from women, seniors and youth.

But are there specific factors that can be attributed as the drivers of change and how will the future unfold for recreation practitioners?

We can answer this question by considering the findings of research conducted by others into the relationship between recreation participation and societal change. Certainly there is evidence to suggest that the role of recreation is becoming broader than simply physical fitness and physical health. Of growing significance is the need for personal well-being in a rapidly changing and stressful world. Melamed (2001), for example notes the contribution of recreational activities – whether active or passive – to personal psychological well-being, physical well-being, community well-being, and personal enhancement through learning. This can also be manifest in increased social interaction. So, here is a link to wellness which Hunter (2003) notes as being an established need after being identified as an emerging trend in the early 1990s.

A further demonstration of the desire for personal well-being from recreational or leisure time is found in the growing rates of participation in after-work learning. Melamed (2001) and Jones and Symons (2001) note the link between learning, self-improvement, the work-place and leisure. The inter-relatedness of these facets creates an environment for life-long learning as individuals seek to improve themselves, either for economic purposes and employment, or for personal enrichment.

Significant factors that underlie the desire for personal well-being are the aging of the population and the continuing significance of dual income earning families (Hunter, 2003). The aging of the population has been well-recognized since the 1980s but now, as the 21<sup>st</sup> century opens, we are at the stage where the Baby-Boom group is passing the age of 50 years and moving towards senior status. Statistics Canada data shows that the fastest growing population cohort is also the

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oldest population group - 80 and over (Johnson, 2003; Kelly and Warnick, 1999). Behind this group is the 45 to 64 cohort, largely consisting of well-educated, reasonably well-off, and relatively health-obsessed “boomers” (Johnson, 2003; Foot, 1996; Kelly and Warnick, 1999). Their needs create demand for self-directed activities, from gardening to biking, where physical and mental health are the by-products.

While the seniors segment continues its growth and impacts on recreation services, what of families and children? This group is increasingly finding time difficult to manage with two parents at work often struggling to find quality time with their children. Further, enrolling children in organized community programs is becoming as much a “need-to-do activity” as making dinner and buying groceries (Zuzanek et al, 1998). Under these circumstances, flexibility in recreation program and service delivery is becoming more critical to meeting the needs of time-pressured consumers.

In Alberta, though, a contrasting experience is anticipated (City of Edmonton, 2003). The age groups of under 9 years of age, 10 to 14 and 15 to 19 are all forecast to have slow or no growth, while the higher growth is anticipated for all other adult age groups. This pattern reflects the continuation on in-migration of working age adults from other parts of Canada in response to Alberta’s strong economy. For Alberta, then, recreation programming needs to continue to offer the types of opportunities desired by young families while adding those opportunities associated with the needs of the seniors population.

The growing importance of women in recreation decision-making is a further extension of family participation. Their role is being defined by their participation in the work-force and the demand this places on their time which becomes exacerbated by their continuing contribution to managing their households (Zuzanek et al, 1998). Again, flexibility in recreation opportunities becomes critically important to recreation providers serving the female and family populations.

Of further note is the focus of women on types of recreation activities. Unlike their male counterparts who prefer activities that have a competitive component, women seek activities that emphasize personal pleasure, enjoyment, stress relief and socialization (Wiley et al, 2000). Activities and programming that are diverse and less tied to family, then, become the core of meeting the demand from women (Kelly and Warnick, 1999).

The nature of programming is also beginning to shift. Activities that are readily accessible and close-to-home are the ones most suited to meeting the need for flexibility, especially for time-stressed families (Foot, 1996). However, activities that meet the needs of specific market niches – for example, older seniors, working women, youth, family-groups – and which may not have mass appeal but have limited levels of demand may prove to be successful for programmers (Foot, 1996; Trendspotting, 2001). Further, the ways by which demand from these groups is met are expected to reflect preferences for individualized participation, often on a drop-in basis as opposed to regularly scheduled class-based programming. Being prepared to meet both the shift in demographic patterns of participation and the individualized focus presents new challenges for recreation practitioners.

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**Linking Society’s Trends and the Alberta Recreation Survey**

There is evidence from the survey data to indicate that many of the trends noted above are being demonstrated in the participation patterns of Albertans. The continuing importance of walking shows that Albertans are willing to find recreation in its simplest form while the popularity of gardening confirms the desire for home-based stress-relief. Furthermore, visits to cultural facilities including museums and galleries remains high on Albertans’ leisure agenda, and the increasing importance found in the percentage of Albertans’ attending courses, speaks to the need for personal development opportunities. Elsewhere, the *Alberta Recreation Survey* is beginning to show a shift from more traditional activities, such as ice hockey, curling and consumptive recreation (hunting) to more contemporary activities such as personal fitness (aerobics and soccer).

Such changes can be expected to continue as urban Alberta continues to experience growth with increased in-migration from both within and outside of Canada. This presents new challenges for rural regions where population levels remain stable or be in decline and where resources are restricted. In such circumstances the need for partnerships between various community organizations becomes greater but can prove successful as the recent developments of multi-purpose facilities have demonstrated in some regions of the province.

New trends can be expected to emerge before the next *Alberta Recreation Survey* is conducted. The implications for the recreation practitioner can be expected to include alternative models of recreation development and service delivery both at the program level and the facility level.

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**Further Information**

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