

# A Look at Leisure

## Constraints to Participation

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### Introduction

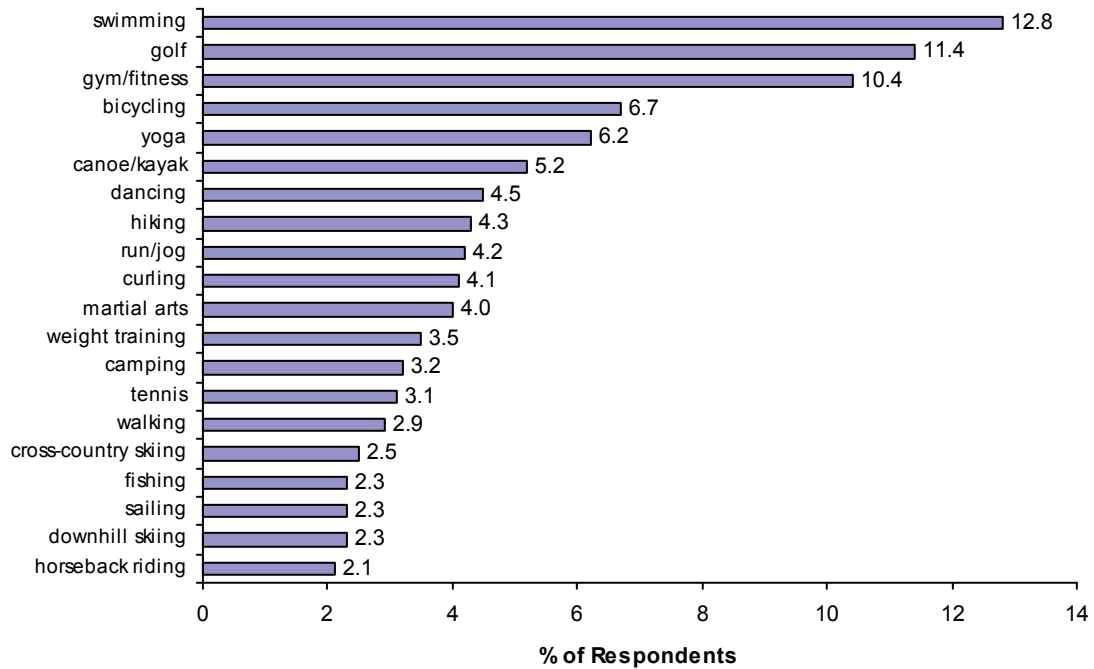
The *Alberta Recreation Survey* has been conducted every four years since 1981. The 2004 survey is the seventh in the series and adds to the wealth of data about how Albertans participate in recreation. This bulletin takes the data from the 2004 survey and looks at the activities Albertans would like to start and the constraints that they believe prevents them from beginning.

This bulletin examines Albertans' responses about the activities they would like to start and the reasons why they have not started these activities. Desired activities are compared with demographic characteristics to determine the personal factors that affect participation. Further comparisons are made between the leading desired activities and the reasons that are described as being the most important constraints.

### Activities Albertans are Interested in Starting

Forty one percent of respondents to the 2004 *Alberta Recreation Survey* indicated that there was at least one activity they would like to start. The most popular new activity was found to be swimming (12.8%) followed by golf, gym/fitness, bicycling and yoga (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
**Top 20 Desired Activities**



## Demographic Profiles Associated with Desired Activities

A look at the demographic characteristics of those people who indicated a desire to start a new activity finds that these people tend to be:

- female,
- between the ages of 18 and 45 (63%),
- with college or university level educations,
- couples with children, single parents and mixed households of related or unrelated adults, and
- experiencing difficulties financially.

Age is a strong influence on the types of activities Albertans are interested in beginning (Table 1). Swimming is popular with all age groups while golf's popularity is with those over age 30 but not those under age 30.

In general, the popularity of the more active pastimes tends to decrease as age increases. Some examples include bicycling, martial arts, and weight training. There are also some activities that are more popular as age increases, including hiking, camping and walking. There are also several activities that are more popular with specific age groups than others, such as curling (for those over age 55), cross-country skiing (30 to 54 group), fishing (over 55 group), and running/jogging (30 to 54 group). Knowing how desired activities relate to the age profile of respondents can help practitioners target their programming efforts in ways that are specific to potential users.

Table 1  
Top 20 Desired Activities by Age

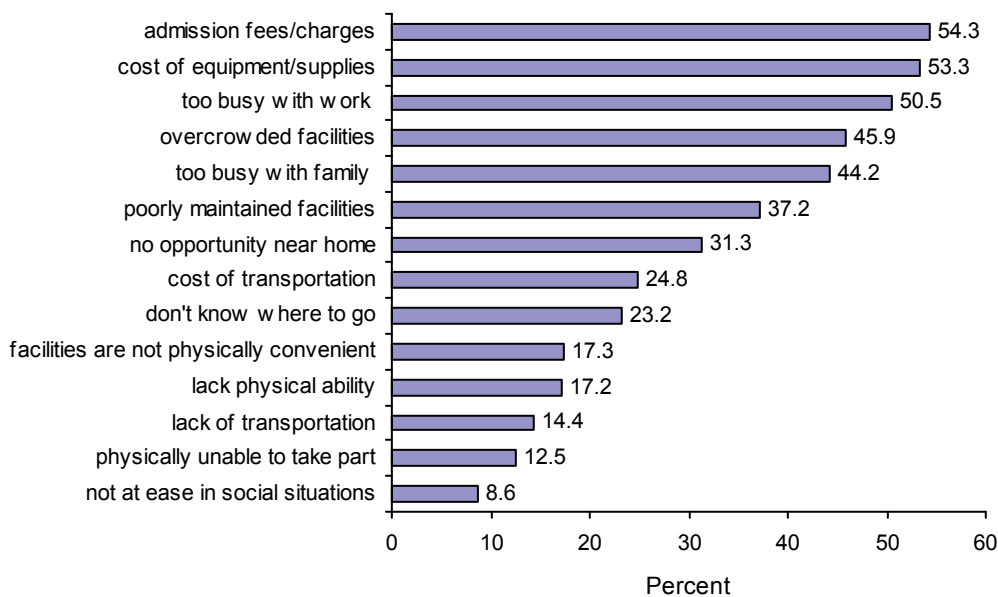
Desired Activity	% Age Category (years)*							
	18-29		30-54		55-65		>65	
	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank
Swimming	11	1	11	2	17	1	13	2
Golf	5	10	12	1	11	2	21	1
Gym/fitness	7	3	11	2	9	3	11	3
Bicycling	7	3	7	4	5	7	4	7
Yoga	7	3	5	7	8	4	4	7
Canoe/kayak	6	7	6	5	6	6	2	13
Dancing	7	3	4	9	3	13	7	5
Hiking	4	12	5	7	4	12	5	6
Running/jogging	2	16	6	5	1	17	2	13
Curling	6	7	3	14	7	5	4	7
Martial arts	9	2	4	9	-	-	1	15
Weight training	6	7	4	9	2	16	1	15
Camping	2	16	3	14	5	7	3	11
Tennis	5	10	4	9	1	17	4	7
Walking	2	16	1	21	5	7	10	4
Cross-country skiing	1	20	4	9	3	13	-	-
Fishing	2	16	2	18	5	7	3	11
Sailing	3	14	2	18	3	13	1	15
Downhill skiing	1	21	2	18	5	7	1	15
Horseback riding	4	12	3	14	1	17	-	-

\* Percentages do not add to 100 as there were more activities reported less frequently

## Overview of Constraints in 2004

Just over half of those respondents who want to start a new activity identified the cost of recreation equipment, materials and supplies, admission fees/charges, and work commitments as the main constraints that prevent them from taking part in activities they would like to start (Figure 2). Constraints such as family commitments and overcrowded facilities were considered to be important or very important to be between 40% and 50% of respondents while 37% of respondents identified poorly maintained facilities as an important limitation. Close to one-third of respondents also indicated that ‘no opportunity near home’ was an important constraint. The remaining potential constraints are important to less than one-quarter of respondents and may be more reflective of specific personal situations.

**Figure 2**  
**Constraints to Participation, 2004**



## How Constraints Affect Activity Start-Ups

Respondents who indicated that they wanted to begin a new activity were then asked to rate a series of possible reasons that prevented them from taking part in their new activity. A comparison of the 10 leading desired activities with constraints is presented in Table 2.

The influence of being ‘too busy with work’ is clear from its presence for each desired activity. Similarly, with the exception of swimming, ‘the cost of equipment/supplies’, appears prominently, and ‘admission fees/charges’ is important to those who desire each of the top 10 activities with the exception of hiking.

Table 2  
Main Constraints for the Top 10 Desired Activities

Desired Activities	Main Constraints	
Swimming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>overcrowded facilities</li> <li>too busy with work</li> <li>poorly maintained facilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>admission fees/charges</li> <li>too busy with family</li> </ul>
Golf	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>admission fees/charges</li> <li>cost of equipment/supplies</li> <li>overcrowded facilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>too busy with family</li> <li>too busy with work</li> </ul>
Gym/fitness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>admission fees/charges</li> <li>too busy with work</li> <li>cost of equipment/supplies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>overcrowded facilities</li> <li>poorly maintained facilities</li> </ul>
Bicycling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>cost of equipment/supplies</li> <li>too busy with work</li> <li>too busy with family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>admission fees/charges</li> <li>poorly maintained facilities</li> </ul>
Yoga	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>admission fees/charges</li> <li>cost of equipment/supplies</li> <li>overcrowded facilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>too busy with work</li> <li>poorly maintained facilities</li> </ul>
Canoe/kayak	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>cost of equipment/supplies</li> <li>too busy with work</li> <li>cost of transportation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>no opportunity near home</li> <li>admission fees/charges</li> </ul>
Dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>cost of equipment/supplies</li> <li>admission fees/charges</li> <li>don't know where to go</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>no opportunity near home</li> <li>too busy with work</li> </ul>
Hiking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>too busy with work</li> <li>too busy with family</li> <li>cost of equipment/supplies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>poorly maintained facilities</li> <li>overcrowded facilities</li> <li>no opportunity near home</li> </ul>
Running/jogging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>too busy with work</li> <li>too busy with family</li> <li>cost of equipment/supplies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>overcrowded facilities</li> <li>admission fees/charges</li> </ul>
Curling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>too busy with family</li> <li>overcrowded facilities</li> <li>too busy with work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>cost of equipment/supplies</li> <li>admission fees/charges</li> <li>lack of physical abilities</li> </ul>

For swimming, the key constraint is 'overcrowded facilities' whereas for golf and gym/fitness the primary constraint is 'admission fees/charges'. The 'cost of equipment/supplies' ranks second for golf and third for gym/fitness. These results reinforce the influence that economic constraints have on levels of participation in these activities.

Those activities that can be done alone, such as bicycling, hiking, and running/jogging appear to be somewhat more constrained by family and work commitments. Participation in outdoor activities such as canoeing/kayaking and hiking are more influenced by the availability of opportunities near to home and, in the case of canoe/kayaking, by the cost of transportation.

## **Demographic Factors Influencing Constraints**

### Constraints By Age, 2004

Table 3 compares the relative importance of each of the constraints to the age of respondents and some notable variances are evident. For young people (18-29), the economic factors of 'cost of equipment/supplies' and 'admission fees/charges' rank as the leading constraints. Being 'too busy with work' and 'too busy with family' become more important constraints to those between the ages of 30 and 54, while for those over the age of 65 the 'admission fees/charges' and 'cost of equipment/supplies' ranks first and second, respectively.

Those in the 55 to 65 age group give most importance to 'admission fees/charges', followed by 'cost of equipment/supplies', and 'too busy with work'. That 'too busy with work' ranks third for this group after being first for the 30 to 54 group begins to demonstrate the influence of retirement on those between the ages of 55 and 65. The 55 to 64 group also give more importance to 'poorly maintained facilities' which they rank fourth compared to its eighth place ranking by those in the 18 to 29 group.

The data also suggest that seniors (65 and over) place more importance on constraints such as 'being physically unable to take part' and 'facilities not physically convenient to use', a finding that presents particular challenges for recreation practitioners and facility providers.

Table 3  
Importance of Constraints By Age

Constraints	Age Category (years)							
	18-29		30-54		55-65		>65	
	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank
Cost of equipment/supplies	63	2	56	2	43	2	44	2
Admission fees/charges	66	1	54	3	49	1	46	1
Too busy with work	54	3	59	1	42	3	24	11
Too busy with family	39	5	54	3	33	5	28	9
Overcrowded facilities	41	4	46	5	9	13	38	3
Poorly maintained facilities	32	8	36	6	40	4	36	5
No opportunity near home	35	7	32	7	25	6	31	8
Don't know where to go	37	6	23	8	13	11	23	12
Cost of transportation	25	9	23	8	22	7	34	6
Facilities not physically convenient to use	15	11	16	10	17	9	27	10
Lack of physical abilities	10	12	12	11	20	8	37	4
Lack of transportation	18	10	12	11	10	12	22	13
Physically unable to take part	3	14	8	13	16	10	33	7
Not at ease in social situations	10	12	7	14	7	14	14	14

### Constraints by Gender, 2004

The 2004 survey data shows little difference in relative ranking of constraints among males and females (Table 4). Both groups share the same items in the five highest rated constraints. Of note, however, is that females rank 'admission fees/charges' first compared to males who rank 'too busy with work' in first place. Being 'too busy with work' ranks third among females while 'cost of equipment/supplies' ranks second for males and females.

Table 4  
Constraints by Gender

Constraints	Male		Female	
	%	rank	%	rank
Cost of equipment/supplies	51	2	56	2
Admission fees/charges	50	3	58	1
Too busy with work	52	1	49	3
Too busy with family	43	5	46	5
Overcrowded facilities	45	4	47	4
Poorly maintained facilities	35	6	39	6
No opportunity near home	28	7	35	7
Don't know where to go	19	9	27	8
Cost of transportation	25	8	25	9
Facilities not physically convenient to use	17	10	18	10
Lack of physical abilities	16	11	18	10
Lack of transportation	11	13	18	10
Physically unable to take part	13	12	12	13
Not at ease in social situations	7	14	10	14

### Constraints By Household Composition, 2004

Household composition influences the relative importance of different constraints, particularly among the five highest ranked constraints (Table 5). For example, couples with no children rank 'admission fees/charges' in first place whereas as couples with children rank this constraint as fourth, behind 'too busy with family', 'too busy with work' and 'cost of equipment/supplies'. Single adults rank 'admission fees/charges' first whereas single parents rank the 'cost of equipment/supplies' and 'too busy with work' as their main constraints.



Table 5  
Constraints by Household Composition

Constraints	Couple, no children		Couple with children		Single adult		Single parent		2+ unrelated adults		2+ related adults	
	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank
Cost of equipment/supplies	49	2	56	3	50	2	57	1	63	1	56	1
Admission fees/charges	50	1	55	4	57	1	44	4	43	2	38	5
Too busy with work	40	4	62	2	45	4	57	1	41	3	42	3
Too busy with family	33	6	69	1	19	12	49	3	9	12	29	8
Overcrowded facilities	43	3	50	5	47	3	38	6	38	4	46	2
Poorly maintained facilities	36	5	38	6	36	6	42	5	31	7	39	4
No opportunity near home	30	7	30	7	37	5	36	7	33	6	32	6
Don't know where to go	22	9	19	9	31	7	26	9	35	5	26	9
Cost of transportation	24	8	21	8	30	8	35	8	22	8	31	7
Facilities not physically convenient to use	17	11	14	10	26	9	19	11	16	9	18	11
Lack of physical abilities	19	10	13	11	22	11	15	12	14	10	23	10
Lack of transportation	13	13	11	12	24	10	22	10	14	10	16	12
Physically unable to take part	15	12	9	13	19	12	8	14	7	13	16	12
Not at ease in social situations	8	14	6	14	17	14	9	13	7	13	8	14

### Constraints By Location, 2004

The five highest ranked constraints are the same regardless of community size but with the exception that residents of communities with less than 6,000 people place more emphasis on there being 'no opportunity near home'. Table 6 also shows that the residents of communities with 500,000 or more people are more inclined to consider 'admission fees/charges' to be the most important constraint, ahead of the 'cost of equipment/supplies'.

Table 6  
Constraints by Location

Constraints	Community Population					
	500,000 and over		6,000 to 65,000		Under 6,000	
	<u>%</u>	<u>rank</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>rank</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>rank</u>
Cost of equipment/supplies	54	2	54	1	56	1
Admission fees/charges	56	1	53	2	43	4
Too busy with work	50	3	51	3	50	2
Too busy with family	44	5	46	4	41	5
Overcrowded facilities	50	3	41	5	33	6
Poorly maintained facilities	38	6	37	6	32	7
No opportunity near home	33	7	28	7	45	3
Don't know where to go	24	8	20	9	30	10
Cost of transportation	24	8	25	8	32	7
Facilities not physically convenient to use	16	10	17	11	32	7
Lack of physical abilities	16	10	18	10	19	11
Lack of transportation	16	10	11	13	17	12
Physically unable to take part	10	13	15	12	15	13
Not at ease in social situations	8	14	9	14	7	14

## Demographic Relationships to Constraints to Participation

The factors that prevent or limit participation in recreation were, until the late 1990's, described as being barriers. By the late nineties, however, it was realized that the term barriers implied insurmountable obstacles when, in reality, participation was being limited, or constrained (Jackson & Burton, 1999). Consequently, if non-participation or lack of participation is constrained, it is reasonable to conclude that constraints might be overcome by trading off other choices that individuals make in their lives. Indeed, Walker and Viriden (2005) note that macro-level constraints on recreation such as gender or socioeconomic situation, are themselves influenced by micro-level factors such as personality traits, personal experiences in participation as well as attitudes and beliefs.

Findings from some research have revealed that non-participants tend to be less interested in taking part and consequently more likely to perceive themselves to be constrained (Petrick et al, 2001, p. 58, and Carroll & Alexandris, 1997, p. 294). However, Carroll and Alexandris (1997) have put forward another aspect, stating that even participants who take part in recreation on a regular and frequent basis can also exhibit high levels of constraint. However, their commitment to continuing to take part prevents them from ending their participation. In the case of those who enjoy risky or extreme activities such as parachuting, rock climbing, Walker and Viriden (2005) report that the personality traits of these individuals are clearly

distinguishable from the traits of those who do not get involved in these types of activities.

While lack of interest and lack of knowledge have been shown to contribute to non-participation (Carroll & Alexandris, 1997, p. 281), Havitz and Dimanche, (1999, p. 142) have noted the link between the pleasure derived from participation and the level of importance of constraints. The extent to which individuals enjoy their activities helps to encourage continued involvement. Enjoyment may be defined in many ways but might include a desire to set and achieve personal goals, wanting to improve performance, wanting to emulate the achievement of others (e.g., peers or professionals), or simply wanting to spend time in a different environment from work or home. The availability of different settings or opportunities for social interactions are similarly influential to how constraints are overcome and participation encouraged (Walker & Virden, 2005, p. 205). Likewise skill level, feelings about an activity, and other decision-making factors are often more influential than demographic characteristics (Petrick et al, 2001, p. 59; and Havitz & Dimanche, 1999, pp. 124-125).

Overcoming constraints to participation often requires some form or degree of change in the behaviour patterns of individuals. This is most commonly associated with the trade-offs people are willing to make to accommodate recreational activities among the many other commitments they have (Scott, 2005, p. 284). This negotiated approach and the actions resulting from it, can include a modification of time, acquisition of skills, change of interpersonal relations and change in leisure aspirations (Carroll & Alexandris, 1997, p. 281). In a negotiated process, decision-making factors and trade-offs can overcome constraints (Alexandris & Carroll, 1997, p. 118). Effectively, this requires some degree of encouragement, incentive or expression of benefits, to begin participation.

The motivation to participate decreases as age increases (Carroll & Alexandris, 1997, p. 290) and perceptions of constraints decrease as education level increases. However, the true relationship between perceptions of constraints and participation in recreation is both complex and unclear (Carroll & Alexandris, 1997, p. 279). Inconsistencies exist for reasons linking lack of participation with socio-demographic variables (Havitz & Dimanche, 1999, p. 143).

Stage of the life cycle is also influential. Personal constraints increase with age and being married with a family means higher time and family constraints (Alexandris & Carroll, 1997, p. 121). After children have grown up family constraints decline in importance but adults between 45 and 65 years tend to report being constrained by a lack of knowledge and time, whereas time is less of a constraint for 18-25 year olds (Alexandris & Carroll, 1997, p. 120).

McGuire and Norman (2005) argue that constraints to participation may be a good thing as we age. Their position is that being less active does not necessarily mean that older people want to get active. Rather, alternative activities become of interest when they reflect how you feel, based on a personal self-assessment of health, for example, and that this is more influential than a person's actual age. So it is a change in choice to match personal interpretations of life-stage and capabilities that affects participation.

Specific distinctions have been found for students and women. Research has found that students are somewhat less constrained and more interested (Alexandris & Carroll, 1997, p. 119). Women have been found to be more likely to be constrained by inter-personal factors such as shyness, lack of skills, and lack of

knowledge as well as financial factors (Alexandris & Carroll, 1997, p. 120; Tsai & Coleman, 1999, p. 258).

Some researchers have hypothesized that constraints to participation vary among different cultural groups. However, Tsai and Coleman (1999, p. 254) found few strong relationships. They found that education levels were more of a factor for those who were starting activities and for those who had recently reduced their levels of participation. Time and cost factors remained important while social-cultural factors such as language were less important to preventing participation (Tsai & Coleman, 1999, p. 255). The most significant factor in Tsai and Coleman's study was the lack of companions among a cultural community with whom to take part.

## **Limitations in Our Constraint Research**

To fully understand the implications of the research and analysis of constraints that restrict Albertans' participation in recreation, it is important to consider several limitations. For the *Alberta Recreation Survey*, a key consideration is the relative position of the constraints question on the questionnaire. It is asked in the context of the desire to start a new activity and the expectations that something might prevent or restrict participation. This question is asked only of those who wish to start a new activity and, as a result, is not answered by all respondents, and this tends to result in a significant percentage of the sample not being eligible to provide their input. It would be helpful to find out from all respondents, rather than a sub-sample, about the factors that they find to be limitations to their participation.

Some terminology is also unclear. For example, the item 'recreation facilities are not physically convenient to use' suggests an access barrier but there is no specific definition associated with what physically convenient to use might mean. It could mean difficulties in travelling to facilities or it could mean that services and equipment at a facility are difficult to use. Consequently, the survey may not be getting at the full impact of this type of barrier to access. Providing clarification to respondents by including definitions or by adding questions that probe issues a little more would improve the interpretation of data for users of the survey results.

Lastly, individual constraints are sometimes directly related to specific activities. That the 'cost of equipment/supplies', for example, was identified as a key constraint to participation in downhill skiing in the early 1980s but is now more linked to golf, suggests an age or life-cycle influence. For those who take part or would like to take part, the cost of golf is now more important than the cost of skiing as older age groups are more likely to be golfers than skiers. Understanding the shift in activity preferences and associated constraints by asking respondents about the things they no longer take part in (as was asked in the 1984 survey) could strengthen the understanding of the influence of age constraints as the population gets older.

## What Can Practitioners Do?

With Albertans showing the most concern with economic constraints, the challenge for practitioners is to demonstrate the true benefits of participation. In this regard, we must remember that our own commitment to recreation and our own understanding of its benefits is in all likelihood at a higher level than among the majority of Albertans. They may not always see that the benefits to personal health and wellness are life-long and can positively contribute to quality of life, rather than being something that is discretionary and that can be done to fill any spare time. Whether walking, gardening, mountain biking or taking part in a team sport, various forms of recreation are available to keep us physically and mentally fit, and we don't all need to spend large amounts of money to access these benefits. Keeping the average Albertan informed on simple and low-cost ways to keep active is fundamental to the role of the practitioner in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Part of achieving successful communication of the benefits of recreation involves providing Albertans with clear definitions of what those benefits are and how recreation programs that are offered can mitigate constraints such as time (Scott, 2005, p. 281). Once this is done, clear statements can be made to support why we should be active in ways that suit our individual needs. While building these benefits statements into public communication programs can be done in ways that target the general population, there is also evidence to indicate that specific messages need to reach specific segments of the population. In this way, potential participants can learn about where to go and what to do to enjoy recreational opportunities that meet their needs (Scott, 2005, p. 282).

Practitioners must also recognize that as Albertans reach different stages of the life cycle - from early adulthood, to family orientation, to older adulthood - needs change and so do the constraints to participation. Younger adults need to overcome cost and access issues before they become challenged by time and work commitments in their mid-adult years. Then as they get older, they need to find opportunities that are not too physically taxing and where these opportunities can be found. Designing recreation programs that are targeted to a specific age group may not be enough when specific constraints, such as past experiences, exist to prevent participation. Knowing what the constraints are within an age group and knowing how to overcome them is critical to supporting participation.

Recognition of the growing importance of perceptions of the declining condition of our recreation facilities will reflect how we deal with facility development and programming. Much of the recreation infrastructure in Alberta is passing its threshold age of 20 years and is due for replacement (ARPA, 2002). Swimming pools with peeling tiles, arenas with an old ice plant, basketball courts with ripped or no nets are just some examples of lower standards than are expected. These things are being noticed and are now becoming a hindrance for a population that likes to spend its leisure time in modern facilities that incorporate contemporary features.

While the desire for the replacement and refurbishment of our facilities is one thing, the cost factor is another. User fees do not cover the full capital costs and are appearing to have a greater impact in limiting participation. In turn, this points to a need for low-cost opportunities to be made available. But it is not just the cost for new or renovated facilities that creates challenges - increasing cost of operations, especially utility charges, is placing further financial pressures on facility providers. Alternative funding continues to be required to off-set the cost to providers and to reduce the influence of economic constraints on users, if

participation is to be encouraged and supported.

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