

# Look at Leisure #39: Favorite Activities

This bulletin examines the activities people enjoy and the reasons why they participate in them. The primary data source for this report is the *Alberta Recreation Survey* conducted in 1996 by Alberta Community Development, in cooperation with Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge and Red Deer. Comparisons with the findings of previous surveys in the series show how preferences for recreation activities are changing in Alberta.

## Leisure Is Important

Leisure and recreation serve an important role in the lives of most people. People participate in activities to satisfy various needs, and receive personal benefits from their participation.

Leisure activities make an important contribution to personal satisfaction and happiness. Some of the general benefits associated with leisure are good mental health and personal growth. Leisure enhances life by providing a means of self-expression, choice, control, and a change from routine (Freysinger, 1987). In addition to these general benefits, there are many specific benefits (such as learning new skills) which people can enjoy. If practitioners understand the types of needs that are met through leisure and recreation, they are better able to design programs that satisfy the needs of consumers, and to market these programs effectively.

This bulletin discusses Albertans' favorite leisure and recreation activities. The discussion also looks at reasons for participating in these activities. It shows how the reasons for participation vary for different people, and how they are linked to different activity preferences.

## Highlights

Important findings which are discussed in this issue include the following:

- Walking for pleasure, camping, golf and bicycling rank highly as favorite activities.
- Pleasure, physical health/exercise, relaxation and nature enjoyment were most frequently mentioned as reasons for participating.
- Reasons for participating vary greatly with age and family type.

## Favorite Activities

Respondents were asked to name their favorite recreation activities. In total, 82 different pursuits were mentioned. The activities which ranked most highly as favorite activities are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Favorite Recreation Activities (1996, 1992, 1988, 1981)**

	Rank 1996	Rank 1992	Rank 1988	Rank 1981
Walking for pleasure	1	1	2	6
Golf	2	3	3	2
Camping	3	2	1	1
Bicycling	n/a	4	6	15
Fishing	4	5	4	4
Reading books/ magazines	5	7	8	7
Swimming	6	6	5	8
Physical fitness (e.g., aerobics/ yoga, etc.)	7	11	12	n/a
Gardening	8	n/a	13	26
Ice hockey	9	8	10	5
Horse riding/ racing	10	14	15	18
Handicrafts	11	10	9	n/a
Baseball	12	9	14	12
Hiking	14	16	19	n/a
Downhill skiing	16	17	7	3
Dancing	17	13	18	13
Curling	18	12	11	10
Hunting/shooting	21	15	16	11

n/a - Not available.

How do Albertans' favorite activities in 1996 compare with those of previous years? Table 1 ranks the individual favorite activities for the years. For these top-ranked activities, we found the following changes from 1981 to 1996:

- Gardening, bicycling, walking for pleasure, horse riding/racing, and swimming have increased in popularity as favorite activities.
- Downhill skiing, hunting/shooting, curling, and camping ranked lower as favorite activities in 1996 than in 1981. As reported in previous *A Look at Leisure* bulletins, racquetball, bowling, jogging, tennis and cross-country skiing ranked in the top 18 activities in 1981, but no longer appear to be as popular.
- Many of the activities were mentioned by a relatively small number of respondents. It is therefore necessary to group them into categories for further analysis. The activity groupings were the same as those developed for past *Public Opinion Surveys on Recreation* so that comparisons can be made across surveys.

The 10 categories used are shown in Table 2, along with examples of the activities included in each category. Activities in the exercise-oriented grouping were identified most frequently.

In Table 3, the favorite activity groupings are compared for 1981, 1988, 1992 and 1996. The data suggest that golf, exercise-oriented and creative-cultural types of activities increased in popularity from 1981 to 1996. Team sports and social-passive pursuits were mentioned less often as favorite types of activities in 1996 than in 1981. The remaining categories were quite stable in popularity.

**Table 3: Favorite Types of Activities**

	1981	1988	1992	1996
Exercise-oriented	25%	30%	38%	32%
Creative-cultural	6%	10%	8%	10%
Team sports	14%	9%	10%	11%
Fishing/Hunting	8%	8%	7%	5%
Social-passive	12%	6%	6%	8%
Mechanical/assisted outdoor activities	6%	6%	5%	4%
Non-mechanized outdoor activities	5%	3%	4%	8%
Camping	9%	10%	10%	8%
Golf	6%	8%	9%	11%
Downhill skiing	5%	4%	4%	4%

## Why People Participate

What does leisure mean to people? What needs are being satisfied by leisure? Why do people choose to participate in certain recreational activities? These are important questions for the recreation practitioner. Knowing why people participate helps us to understand what people desire in their recreation activities. It also suggests the qualities in programs which will attract and satisfy participants.

Reasons for participation (or motivations) are complex. These are some of the observations that researchers have made on this topic:

- Participation in an activity may satisfy a variety of needs for an individual.
- Different people may be participating in a given activity for very different reasons.
- Some reasons for participation may be very general (such as pleasure), while some reasons may be very specific (such as meeting new people) (Crandall, 1980).
- Even though preferred activities may vary for different cultures, people in various parts of the world have similar reasons for participating in recreation (Cato and Kunstler, 1988).

The Recreation Surveys have examined the importance of peoples' reasons for participation in favorite recreation activities. The highest ranked reasons for participation were pleasure, relaxation, physical health or exercise, doing something different from work, and enjoyment of nature. Reasons such as competing, showing accomplishments to others, and being away from the family ranked relatively low in importance.

Although the 1996 *Alberta Recreation Survey* does not include a complete listing of reasons for participation, it does represent the key groups of reasons identified in other studies. For example, Beard and Ragheb (1983) found that reasons for participation group into four major categories. These are:

- *Intellectual* - involving learning and creativity;
- *Stimulus Avoidance* - relaxing and avoiding stressful situations;
- *Social* - involving friendship and esteem of others; and,
- *Competence/mastery* - including achievement, mastery, challenge, and competition, often physical in nature.

The surveys have also looked at reasons for participation in favorite recreation activities (*A Look at Leisure* #3, #26). The rankings of the reasons have been very consistent over the years. Reasons for

**Table 2: Favorite Activity Category Profiles**

<p><b>1. Exercise-Oriented Activities</b>            Examples: Walking for pleasure, swimming, bicycling.            Profile: More often reported as a favorite activity by females; participation declines with increasing age up to 64 years, then increases slightly for those 65 or over; associated with higher education levels.            Main Reasons: Motivated by pleasure, physical health and exercise, relaxation, an alternative to work, enjoyment of nature, and social reasons.</p>	<p><b>5. Fishing/Hunting (Extractive) Activities</b>            Profile: More likely to be favored by males than females; interest increases with age.            Main Reasons: Pleasure, enjoyment of nature, relaxation, doing something different from work, excitement, being with the family, challenge, and physical health or exercise.</p>
<p><b>2. Creative-Cultural Activities</b>            Examples: Crafts, hobbies, and performing arts.            Profile: More likely to be enjoyed by females than males and by those 45 years or older.            Main Reasons: Pleasure, relaxation, being creative, doing something different from work, and skill development.</p>	<p><b>6. Golf</b>            Profile: More likely to be favored by males than females; interest increases with age.            Main Reasons: Pleasure, physical health or exercise, relaxation, socializing, and skill development.</p>
<p><b>3. Camping</b>            Profile: Interest peaks between 35 and 64 years of age, and declines for those over 65. Less appealing to those with university/college educations.            Main Reasons: Pleasure, relaxation, enjoyment of nature, being with the family, doing something different from work, and doing things with friends.</p>	<p><b>7. Social-Passive Activities</b>            Examples: Board and table games, entertaining, reading.            Profile: More likely to be favored by females than males; interest is stable across age categories but increases over the age of 65.            Main Reasons: Pleasure, relaxation, doing something different from work, improving skills and abilities, learning new skills, and socializing.</p>
<p><b>4. Team Sports</b>            Examples: Ice hockey, curling, baseball, volleyball.            Profile: Preference more likely to be expressed by males than females; interest declines with age.            Main Reasons: Pleasure, physical health or exercise, excitement, challenge, doing things with friends, and doing something different from work.</p>	<p><b>8. Mechanized/Assisted Outdoor Activities</b>            Examples: Horse riding, driving for pleasure, snowmobiling, boating.            Profile: Adults under 25 years slightly more likely than older adults to state a preference for this type of activity.            Main Reasons: Pleasure, enjoying nature, relaxation, doing something different from work, excitement, being with the family, and socializing with friends.</p>
	<p><b>9. Downhill Skiing</b>            Profile: Peaks as a favorite activity between 25 and 44 years of age.            Main Reasons: Pleasure, physical health or exercise, excitement, relaxation, learning new skills, and enjoying nature.</p>
	<p><b>10. Non-Mechanized Outdoor Activities</b>            Examples: Hiking, cross-country skiing, canoeing/kayaking.            Profile: Interest quite stable across age categories and is linked with higher education levels.            Main Reasons: Pleasure, enjoyment of nature, physical health or exercise, relaxation, doing something different from work, and improving skills.</p>

participation seem to be quite stable. Although some needs may vary with current social trends, it seems that basic human needs, as outlined in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, are quite constant (Cato and Kunstler, 1988).

### **Reasons and Type of Activity**

What are the main reasons for participating in different types of activities? Do different activities satisfy different needs? The most important reasons for participation in each of the 10 activity groupings were summarized in Table 2. Pleasure and relaxation seem to be very general benefits associated with most types of leisure activities.

On the other hand, there are certain types of activities which meet some needs better than others. Activities for which skill development is particularly important are creative-cultural and social-passive pursuits, golf, and downhill skiing. Social and family reasons are quite important to participants in exercise-oriented activities, team sports, fishing/hunting pursuits, golf, and camping. Types of activities most likely to meet needs of competence and mastery include: team sports; mechanized outdoor pursuits; downhill skiing; and fishing/hunting activities.

### **How Reasons Vary Over the Life Cycle**

How do these reasons vary for different sub-groups of the population? Several studies have shown that the meaning and role of leisure varies throughout life (e.g., Freysinger, 1987; Osgood and Howe, 1984).

Data from the 1996 *Alberta Recreation Survey* show how reasons for participation change with age. There are several age-related patterns. Examples of the patterns are provided in Table 4.

Although the importance of each of the reasons has remained fairly constant over the eight years for which comparisons are possible, it is evident that there is considerable variation between different age groups.

Broadly speaking, the need to acquire and demonstrate skills declines over the years, as does the desire for challenge, creativity and excitement. Desire for exercise, enjoyment of nature, social and family experiences remain more or less constant throughout. The wish to help the community increases with age.

As the population ages, researchers have begun to look closely at the importance of leisure during the mid-adult and senior years (e.g., Freysinger, 1987; Tinsley et al, 1987). Freysinger (1987) has found, for example, that there is an increasing value placed on leisure as adults approach middle age. This is

perhaps because of the scarcity of leisure, an increasing emphasis on enjoyment and personal satisfaction, a growing need for relaxation, and expanding interests. People also realize that leisure is necessary for a sense of wholeness (Freysinger, 1987).

Our surveys have shown that there are some sex differences in the importance of reasons for participation. Reasons which seem to be more important to males than females are challenge, competition, and being good at the activity. Reasons particularly important to females are to keep busy, to be creative, to be with the family, and to do something different from work.

### **What Does This Mean For the Practitioner?**

Many personal needs are met through leisure and recreation. If people are matched with activities that meet their needs, their overall satisfaction should increase (Crandall, 1980).

What motivates people to participate in your programs? This bulletin provides a good indication of reasons that may be important to your clientele. The importance of reasons varies somewhat for different people. It would be helpful to ask the participants in your programs to discuss the types of reasons which are most important to them.

Do your programs offer opportunities to meet the four basic groups of needs - intellectual, social, stimulus avoidance, and competence/mastery (Beard and Ragheb, 1983)? Do you know which of your programs meets each of these needs most effectively? Have you tried to market your programs by informing people about the benefits to be gained from participation? Most promotional material simply provides a listing or description of program offerings. It might also inform people about the benefits they will receive from programs, such as learning new skills, doing something different from work, or experiencing a challenge. This type of information may help people to think about their leisure needs. It will also help them to select leisure experiences which will meet those needs.

Do you offer any services such as leisure counselling or leisure education which will help clients to identify their needs? What can you do to match them with programs which will best meet their needs?

The survey results show that reasons for participation change throughout life. For example, the need to relax increases in importance throughout the life span, but is not as important in the retirement years. In many ways, older participants are similar to the young adult clientele in terms of their reasons for participation. Social needs are very important to both

**Table 4: Reasons for Participating - Changes Over Time, 1988, 1992, 1996\***

TO BE ALONE							TO DO THINGS WITH FRIENDS						
Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All	Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All
88	28	26	22	16	9	20	88	70	67	58	55	43	59
92	34	28	29	26	18	28	92	79	68	65	62	71	67
96	39	29	26	22	13	23	96	79	70	62	57	46	59
TO BE AWAY FROM FAMILY							BECAUSE I'M GOOD AT IT						
Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All	Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All
88	14	8	6	4	2	6	88	36	31	24	19	15	25
92	17	12	9	7	6	9	92	39	35	28	24	26	30
96	19	10	10	5	5	8	96	50	36	30	21	18	27
TO KEEP BUSY							TO HELP THE COMMUNITY						
Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All	Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All
88	55	42	33	38	34	39	88	17	18	22	23	20	20
92	65	45	38	41	58	45	92	19	20	24	28	37	24
96	71	54	42	39	37	44	96	21	18	20	21	19	20
FOR A CHALLENGE							TO IMPROVE SKILLS						
Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All	Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All
88	71	65	57	41	27	52	88	71	67	59	45	32	55
92	81	69	63	54	46	62	92	79	68	63	58	55	64
96	83	72	62	49	34	54	96	78	69	61	54	38	55
TO COMPETE							TO LEARN SKILL						
Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All	Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All
92	18	16	12	12	8	13	88	72	67	59	44	28	54
92	18	18	14	9	19	15	92	83	67	63	55	48	62
96	25	18	11	12	10	13	96	78	71	62	51	34	54
TO BE CREATIVE							TO MEET NEW PEOPLE						
Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All	Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All
88	34	34	28	28	20	29	88	51	44	36	39	32	40
92	35	31	36	35	36	35	92	50	43	42	42	52	44
96	36	37	33	30	24	30	96	47	39	34	35	31	35
DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT FROM WORK							ENJOY NATURE						
Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All	Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All
88	76	74	69	63	31	64	88	60	70	68	65	46	64
92	83	75	75	74	57	74	92	72	72	74	78	74	75
96	77	76	69	62	37	60	96	66	73	72	70.6	48	65
FOR EXCITEMENT							FOR PLEASURE						
Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All	Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All
88	81	70	53	38	25	53	88	91	92	89	81	59	83
92	88	74	62	47	41	61	92	96	96	93	93	84	93
96	87	76	62	42	30	52	96	94	94	92	86	64	83
PHYSICAL HEALTH and EXERCISE							TO RELAX						
Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All	Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All
88	78	77	70	63	50	68	88	75	80	81	74	51	74
92	83	80	80	79	80	80	92	81	83	85	86	76	84
96	88	84	80	77	60	75	96	77	86	82	80	54	74
TO BE WITH FAMILY							TO SHOW OTHERS I COULD DO IT						
Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All	Yr.	1	2	3	4	5	All
88	50	61	67	56	39	56	88	18	11	6	7	6	9
92	51	63	71	69	65	66	92	18	11	9	9	13	11
96	45	61	67	57	40	55	96	17	11	10	8	8	9

\* The data in this table are the percentages of each age group that responded that the reason for participating was either 'important' or 'very important'. Columns 1 - 5 in each sub-table represent the five age groups: 18-25, 26-34, 35-44, 45-64, and 65 and over. The 6th column shows what

might be thought of as a 'weighted average' of the other five. The rows in each sub-table show results according to the year of the survey.

of these groups. Do you try to design your programs to meet the main needs of each age group?

Client satisfaction is an important goal of recreation services. Clients are not simply participating in leisure activities. They are seeking experiences which will satisfy a variety of needs. Understanding these needs is an important tool for recreation practitioners concerned with developing programs that are appropriate and attractive to a varied clientele.

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