

# A Look at Leisure #41: Favourite Activities

This bulletin examines the activities people enjoy and the reasons why they participate. The primary data source for this report is the Alberta Recreation Survey conducted in 2000 by Alberta Community Development, in cooperation with the Alberta Centre for Well-Being, Alberta Environment, and the Cities of 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

Previous studies indicate that free time for Canadians is increasing in quality and importance. More than half the population views leisure time as more important, or equally important as work. (Jack Harper, Denny Neider and Geoffrey Godbey, 1997) As a result, leisure and recreation play an important role in the development of Canadians and in their quality of life. People participate in recreation and leisure activities to obtain a variety of benefits – economic, physiological, environmental, psychological, and social. (“White Paper #7: The Benefits of Leisure,” The Academy of Leisure Sciences)

This bulletin discusses Alberta’s favourite leisure and recreation activities and identifies the reasons for participation in these activities. In addition, this bulletin identifies reasons for participant differences and how these differences are linked to activity preferences.

## Highlights

Significant findings discussed in this bulletin include:

- Walking for pleasure, golf, camping and bicycling rank as highly favoured activities.
- Pleasure, physical health/exercise, to relax, and to enjoy nature are most frequently mentioned as reasons for participating.
- Exercise-oriented, creative-cultural, golf, and social-passive activity categories are frequently cited as favourite activity types of leisure and recreation.
- Reasons for participation vary depending on age and household type.

## Favourite Activities

Respondents were asked to name their three favourite recreation activities. In total, 71 different activities were mentioned. Activities ranked most highly as favourite activities are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Favourite Recreation Activities (2000, 1996, 1992, 1988, 1981)**

	Rank 2000	Rank 1996	Rank 1992	Rank 1988	Rank 1981
Walking for pleasure	1	1	1	2	6
Golf	2	2	3	3	2
Camping	3	3	2	1	1
Bicycling	4	n/a	4	6	15
Craft/Hobby	5	10	10	8	n/a
Gardening	6	8	27	13	26
Swimming	7	6	6	5	8
Read books/ magazines	8	5	7	7	7
Hiking/ backpacking	9	13	16	19	23
Fishing	10	4	5	4	4
Running/ jogging	11	9	21	25	16
Downhill skiing/ snowboarding	12	14	17	11	3
Performing arts	13	32	19	37	n/a
Ice hockey	14	27	8	9	5
Aerobic/fit- ness/aquasize	15	7	11	12	n/a
Softball/ baseball	16	11	9	14	12
Curling	17	17	12	10	10
Soccer	18	29	n/a	54	35
Dancing	19	16	13	18	13
Hunting/ shooting	20	20	15	16	11
TV/movies	20	31	n/a	41	21

n/a – Not available

How do Albertans’ favourite activities in 2000 compare with those of previous years? Table 1 ranks the 2000 individual favourite activities with four previous surveys. For these top-ranked activities, the following changes occurred between 1981 to 2000.

- Crafts/hobbies, and gardening have notably increased in popularity as favourite activities.

These activities also reflect the most dramatic increase since 1996.

- There was a slight increase in popularity from the past two reporting periods in downhill skiing, which had dropped dramatically in popularity in 1992.
- Ice hockey, aerobics/fitness/aquasize, reading books/magazines, softball/baseball, dancing, and hunting/shooting ranked lower as favourite activities.
- Fishing dropped significantly in rank from 1996 from a steady 4 or 5 ranking to the 10<sup>th</sup> position in 2000.
- Performing arts, running/jogging, soccer, and TV/movies are emerging as top-ranked favourite activities.
- Many of the activities were mentioned by a relatively small number of respondents. Therefore, it is necessary to group them into categories for further analysis. The activity groupings were the same as those developed for past surveys 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.

**Table 2: Favourite Activity Category**

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## Profiles

### **1. Exercise-Oriented Activities**

Example: Walking for pleasure, swimming, bicycling.

Profile: Favoured activity by all household types, but more often named by couples with children; most often reported as a favourite activity by the 36-55 age-groups, and participation decreases with age; activities favoured by slightly more females than males; associated with higher education levels, and with mid-range salaries (\$30,001-\$50,000).

Main Reasons: Pleasure, to enjoy nature, to relax, for physical health/exercise, to do something different from work, and to be with family.

### **2. Team Sports**

Example: Ice hockey, curling, baseball, volleyball, soccer.

Profile: Most likely to be named by males or females aged 26-45 in households with children, and in the \$30,001-\$50,000 income range; more frequently reported as a favourite activity by males; low participation was reported by technical or vocational program graduates.

Main Reasons: Physical health/exercise, pleasure, for a challenge, excitement, to do things with friends, and to improve skills.

### **3. Creative-Cultural Activities**

Example: Crafts, hobbies, and performing arts.

Profile: Favoured by couples with children households; most often cited by the 36-45 age group, increasing again between the ages of 65-75; reported as a favourite activity by females; associated with all levels of education; linked to the \$30,001-\$50,000 income range.

Main Reasons: Pleasure, relaxation, to learn new skills, to be creative, to improve skills, and to enjoy nature.

### **4. Social-Passive Activities**

Example: Board and table games, entertaining, reading books/magazines, TV/movies.

Profile: Favoured by couples without children; interest increases with age up to 55, then increases again in the 66-75 age group; most often identified by females, and those in the \$10,001-\$30,000 income range.

Main Reasons: Pleasure, relaxation, to improve skills, for physical health/exercise, to do something different from work, and to learn new skills.

### **5. Mechanized/Assisted Outdoor Activities**

Example: Horse riding, driving for pleasure, snowmobiling, boating.

Profile: Interest increases with age up to 55; favoured by males, couples with children, and technical or vocational college graduates.

Main Reasons: Pleasure, to enjoy nature, relaxation, to do something different from work, for excitement, and for physical health/exercise.

## 6. Non-Mechanized Outdoor Activities

- Example:** Hiking, cross-country skiing, canoeing/kayaking.
- Profile:** Strongest interest among males aged 26-35, and households of couples without children; interest is linked with higher education.
- Main Reasons:** Physical health/exercise, to enjoy nature, pleasure, relaxation, to do things with friends, and for a challenge.

## 7. Golf

- Profile:** Most frequently enjoyed by couples without children; more likely to be favoured by males than females; participation increases with age up to 55 and with income.
- Main Reasons:** Pleasure, physical health/exercise, relaxation, to do things with friends, to enjoy nature, and for a challenge.

## 8. Camping

- Profile:** Greatest interest among couples with children and with males; activity gradually increases up to ages 36-45.
- Main Reasons:** Pleasure, to enjoy nature, relaxation, to be with family, to do something different from work, and for physical health/exercise.

## 9. Fishing/Hunting (Extractive) Activities

- Profile:** More likely to be favoured by males than females; highest interest between ages 35 and 55; associated with lower education levels.
- Main Reasons:** Pleasure, to enjoy nature, to relax, for excitement, for a challenge, to do something different from work.

## 10. Downhill Skiing/Snowboarding

- Profile:** Least amount of interest by the 18-25 age group, and 55 and over age group; most likely to be favoured by males and by university graduates.
- Main Reasons:** Pleasure, for physical health/exercise, to enjoy nature, for excitement, to relax, and for a challenge.

Walking for pleasure is reported to be Alberta's favourite recreation activity. In the 2000 survey most reported walking on streets and trails. This activity far exceeds all others as one of the most frequently repeated favourite activities over the survey years. This finding corresponds with national

findings that walking is the most popular Canadian activity. (C. Craig, S. Storm, and C. Cameron, 1995)

In Table 3, the favourite activity groupings are compared for 1981, 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000. How do the 2000 activities compare to other years? Compared to data from 1981, the 2000 data suggests a steady increase in popularity of exercise-oriented, creative-cultural activities and golf since 1981. Team sports, fishing/hunting, mechanical/assisted outdoor activities, and downhill skiing/snowboarding were mentioned less often than in past years. All other categories remained relatively stable.

**Table 3: Favourite Types of Activities**

	2000	1996	1992	1988	1981
Exercise-oriented	37%	32%	38%	30%	25%
Creative-cultural	10%	10%	8%	10%	6%
Golf	10%	11%	9%	8%	6%
Social-passive	9%	8%	6%	6%	12%
Team sports	8%	11%	10%	9%	14%
Camping	8%	8%	10%	10%	9%
Non-mechanized outdoor activities	5%	8%	4%	3%	5%
Fishing/hunting	4%	5%	7%	8%	8%
Mechanical assisted outdoor activities	3%	4%	5%	6%	6%
Downhill skiing/snowboarding	3%	4%	4%	4%	5%

## Why People Participate

It is important to know why people participate in certain activities to understand what they expect to gain and how to attract them to programs. Canadian studies have broken down the benefits of certain activities into the following five dimensions:

- *General Health:* positively affects mortality, general health status, and absenteeism.
- *Biological Health:* improvements and prevention in coronary heart disease, diabetes, cancer, back-problems, osteoporosis, high blood pressure, and obesity.
- *Mental Health:* for anxiety and stress, depression, emotional well-being, and satisfaction.
- *Community Health:* for crime prevention, substance abuse, and productivity.
- *Human Development:* aids in development of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and learning and cognitive function.

(C. Craig, S. Russell, and C. Cameron, 1995)

Researchers have divided leisure and recreation benefits into two motives - intrinsic and extrinsic motivations.

- *Intrinsic motivations* are the internal benefits to the individual, including, personal satisfaction, feelings of well-being, and enjoyment.
- *Extrinsic motivations* are the external benefits affecting an individual's participation. Extrinsic motivations include monetary/material reward, trophies, social recognition, status, and acceptance. However, intrinsic motives are more likely to be strongly linked to continued participation.

(C. L. Craig, S. Russell, and C. Cameron, 1995)

Benefits to participation in leisure activities can be further divided into four categories:

- *Personal benefits:* for example, disease prevention, improved physical health, improved socialization, physical and emotional release, and learning.
- *Social benefits:* for example, prevents isolation, and helps eliminate social distinctions.
- *Economic benefits:* for example, leisure and recreation activities support the economy.
- *Environmental benefits:* for example, promotes maintenance and development of national/provincial/municipal parks and recreation areas.

('Benefits of and Deterrents to Recreation Participation,' Wendy Hultsman, 16-17)

The Alberta Recreation Surveys have examined the importance level of peoples' reasons for participation in favourite recreation activities. The highest ranked reasons for participation are for pleasure, for physical health/exercise, to relax, to enjoy nature, and to do something different from work. Reasons such as; to be away from family, to compete with others, and to show others I can do it, ranked relatively low in importance.

### Reasons and Type of Activity

The main reasons for participation in each of the ten activity groupings are summarized in Table 2. Almost all include reasons such as for pleasure and to relax, as reasons for participating in the various activities. However, there are variations in reasons given for most activity type as each has its unique benefits. For example, participating in social activities (team sports, golf, camping, and exercise) means being with friends and family. Outdoor activities (mechanized and non-mechanized outdoor activities, fishing/hunting, and downhill

skiing/snowboarding) are popular for different reasons, such as, the challenge and the excitement.

### How Reasons Vary Over the Life Cycle

It is known that the role of leisure in people's lives varies as they go through different stages of their life. The results of the 2000 Alberta Recreation Survey show that reasons for participation do vary with age. Noticeable patterns relating to age are provided in Table 4 on page 6. The middle aged group, those ages 26-64, tend to place the same value on reasons for participating, with the exception of 'to do something different from work', where there is a steady decline in importance from age 18. Participation for pleasure is noted most often by all age groups. Leisure for physical fitness remains constant through the life cycle, and leisure activities that allow individuals to relax, and be with family members is highest for the middle age group (ages 26-64). The 65 and older age group rated all of the reasons with the least importance of any age groups. The exception was participation for physical health/exercise, which they rated slightly higher than those aged 45-64.

Though there is variation in leisure and recreation participation through people's life cycle, there are activities that are continuous throughout their life. Involvement in certain activities during childhood and adolescence is more likely to stimulate adult participation in these same activities for years. (Pangrazi, Corbin, Welk, 1997) Key characteristics for continuous participation throughout one's life include:

- Versatility in an activity so it can be performed individually, with partners, or as a group.
- Non-competitive activity, and those the individual chooses.
- When participation does not require a strong mental effort.
- When personal value is derived from the activity.
- When there is accomplishment without self-criticism.

In addition, a 1998 study showed that adolescent participation in activities was as useful an indicator of adult participation as were gender, health, education, and income. (Scott and Willits, 1998)

There are many benefits to leisure and recreation associated with specific periods of the life cycle. For example, during adolescent development "leisure provides an outlet and shelter for both experimentation and maturation in learning to deal with the challenges and pressures they

[adolescents] will meet during their eventual transition into adult." (Hultsman, 1996). This is reflected in Hultsman's study of the benefits of leisure in early adolescence. Benefits identified at the adolescent stage are having fun, searching for identity, relating to others, filling time, and improving talents.

Researchers have found activity motivation and benefits for adults (16 years and older) to include feeling better, having fun, controlling weight, increasing flexibility, and reducing stress. (C. L. Craig, S. Russell, and C. Cameron, 1995)

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

What does all of this mean for the practitioner when planning programs that provide what is important to their clients?

"People are more likely to become and remain active if they perceive that the benefits of participation outweigh the cost, be it time, effort, energy costs, or simply dollar costs." (Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute, Bulletin 28, 1997). By recognizing the benefits of recreation, practitioners can develop promotional messages to suit the interests of the population. Benefits sought by recreation participants and possible participants, can be used by recreation practitioners for future leisure planning. Five key benefit measures, laid out by adolescents in a 1996 study, are useful in future leisure programming:

- Enjoyment level: is the activity fun?
- Program-related: program details that provide benefits.
- Supportive environment: a safe environment to pursue leisure activities.
- Operations and logistics: way in which programs are developed and implemented, the importance of participant input in program planning.
- Continuation: variety and choice in program offerings, cost-sensitivity, convenience, and accessibility.

('Benefits of and Deterrents to Recreation Participation,' Wendy Hultsman, 28-29)

Programs should be marketed by indicating the general benefits derived from an activity. It is important to recognize what aspects of personal, social, economic, environmental and community benefits should be identified to attract participants. For example, promotion of adolescent recreational activities should focus on fun, improved talents, non-competitive atmosphere, and a means of personal identification.

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**Table 4**

**Top Five (5) Reasons for Participating by Age Groups (2000)  
(Very Important & Somewhat Important Ratings)**

