

# Adventure Recreation

## Coming Soon to Your Community

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*Whitewater in cities? Mountain biking without mountains? Outdoor adventure gains popularity in “backyards” everywhere.*

Unless a person lived in areas conducive to adventure recreation—such as canoeing and kayaking, bouldering and rock climbing, or mountain biking—considerable travel used to be necessary to participate in such activities. This is changing, however, as the number of artificially created recreation environments in cities and communities continues to grow around the United States (Priest & Gass, 2001). Local schools are building ropes and challenge courses for physical education programs; city parks and recreation departments are constructing whitewater parks for canoeing and kayaking enthusiasts; county park departments are transforming portions of their greenways into mountain bike trails; and communities are beginning to see the potential of large rocks for bouldering activities. Priest and Gass predicted that these numbers will continue to grow considerably in North America, Europe, and Australia.

### **Benefits of Adventure Recreation Close to Home**

Having adventure recreation venues close to home addresses a number of problems faced by Americans today. For families with small children, keeping up with daily schedules of work, extracurricular activities, and civic obligations comes at the expense of longer vacations to far-away places (Cooke, 2004; Egan, 2006). This may also be in response to rising fuel costs and a fast-paced lifestyle. Having new and exciting adventure recreation opportunities available locally makes staying closer to home an appealing option.

Another benefit of the provision of local adventure recreation is that it addresses “nature-deficit disorder,” a problem noted by Richard Louv (2005), author of *Last Child in the Woods*. Louv contends that children today prefer to stay indoors, surrounded by technologies, such as PlayStation 2, Xbox, and the Internet. A preference for staying indoors can lead to a sedentary lifestyle, childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder, depression, and other problems (Louv). Conversely, children who spend considerable time outdoors, tend to be more active and healthier than their sedentary counterparts. Louv argues that children’s creativity and critical-thinking skills are enhanced when time is spent in nature, camping, creating tree forts, playing in ponds, and the like. Finally, time spent in nature can equip children with the skills needed to deal with stress and help them to improve their concentration skills (Louv). Adventure recreation provided locally can serve as an impetus to mitigate

the effects of nature-deficit disorder.

Another component of providing local adventure recreation stems from changes in physical education curricula around the United States. Called "New P.E.," these curricular changes focus more on individual health and fitness and less on the acquisition of athletic skills (Lambert, 2000). Some activities that support New P.E. are outdoor, adventure-based, and individual-oriented. Climbing walls and rope courses are being installed in school gymnasiums, and more physical education teachers are beginning to use local resources such as city and county recreation departments as their classroom. For example, some physical educators teach geocaching as part of their curriculum. Geocaching, a high-tech outdoor adventure activity, requires participants to search and find hidden treasures in outdoor areas, such as parks, by using Global Positioning System (GPS) receivers and satellite data (Schlatter & Hurd, 2005).

In the Midwest, there is a lack of outdoor amenities, such as mountains, oceans, and whitewater rivers. Young people may attend college in their home state to take advantage of in-state tuition and proximity to their families, then leave for jobs in places with more outdoor recreation opportunities. This creates a "brain drain" (ECONorthwest, 2006, p. ii), the loss of highly educated citizens to the detriment of state and local economies. Providing outdoor adventure opportunities in Midwestern communities could improve the quality of life and help alleviate the tendency for young people to move away.

## Getting Started

Grass-roots organizations within a local community are usually responsible for pushing proposals for outdoor adventure venues. Sometimes, however, the initiative for these movements starts in local park and recreation departments. Professionals in the field who attend conferences or tour new recreation facilities may return home with ideas for their communities. Opening the door to the possibilities is often all it takes to get a grass-roots movement started. Discussions in a public forum, like a park board or city council meeting, or an article in the local newspaper can make residents aware of the potential for public lands. An article by the local recreation staff about possible uses of a large expanse of unused city property, with the note that plans are fluid, may be all that is necessary to alert the grass-roots organizations that are looking for opportunities and places to practice their chosen activities (Konz, 2002).

Grass-roots organizations—such as local mountain biking, kayaking, and climbing clubs—and the interested citizens who belong to such recreational organizations, begin the proposal process by attending city meetings to voice their desires for such provisions. The step-by-step process for the creation of an adventure recreation area includes the following steps:

1. Voice ideas and discuss the benefits of the new venue with local city officials and park boards.
2. Seek political support at all levels of the government.



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Climbing walls have brought rock climbing into recreation centers and classrooms.

3. Investigate funding options.
4. Locate an appropriate site for the venue.
5. Obtain permits and authorizations from local, state, and federal agencies.
6. Design and construct the venues.

## Whitewater Parks in Cities?

Whitewater parks are watercourses that have been artificially modified for the purposes of creating whitewater activities for canoeists and kayakers (American Whitewater, 2005). By adding obstacles like rocks or boulders, pinching in the banks, and building up the bottom to create drop, it is possible to modify the natural water flow of a river channel to create whitewater, pools, and eddies to play in. Whitewater parks can also be created outside the riverbed by diverting the water from the river through a separate channel where obstacles are pre-placed. If there is no river available, or if the water flow is insufficient, a third option would be to create a self-contained course where the water flow is artificially created by pumps (Kincaid, 2005). Whitewater parks bring fishermen, kayakers, and canoeists to the area, as well as walkers, bikers, and spectators when the park is built adjacent to a greenway. Venues conducive to these parks include natural, modified, and human-made river channels. The presence of a whitewater park can benefit a community through river restoration and economic development (American Whitewater, 2005). Noteworthy urban whitewater parks include Truckee River Whitewater Park in Reno, Nevada, and Clear Creek Whitewater Park in Golden, Colorado. Other communities—such as Kearney, Nebraska, and Minneapolis, Minnesota—are in various stages of whitewater-park planning or construction.

Grass-root efforts to create whitewater parks begin with interested citizens approaching local government officials with their ideas. The group must demonstrate the effects on local businesses, convention and visitor bureaus, and the community as a whole. In some communities, it may be beneficial to "sell" the idea to state-level stakeholders as well,



The Platte River in downtown Denver, Colorado, provides recreation opportunities for canoeists, kayakers, and other water-sport enthusiasts.

since an attraction such as a whitewater park can boost state and regional tourism. These state-level stakeholders may be potential funding sources for the project. Adventure recreation, such as whitewater parks, can enhance the economic development, quality of life, and beauty of natural resources (American Whitewater, 2005).

Building a whitewater park may require consent and permits from federal and state agencies that oversee water resources, such as the Army Corps of Engineers and the Department of Natural Resources. Interested parties must comply with all government regulations pertaining to water quality for a fish and wildlife habitat (American Whitewater, 2005). If the watercourse is downstream from a dam or hydroelectric plant, water flow may vary considerably on days when water is released.

Gaining input from the local whitewater enthusiasts is essential during the design stage. These types of park areas will have a large number of users in nonstructured, or drop-in, activities. The users can be key sources of valuable input regarding facility feedback and program ideas. They can help to determine what kind of watercourse would be best. The city will need to consider whether they want world-class whitewater and want to host competitive events, or whether a more recreational venue would be more attractive. Once design plans have been drawn, local engineering companies can build the actual park. Funding can come from a variety of sources, including local taxes, bonds, grants, and concessionaire fees.

### Mountain Biking Without the Mountains

Despite their name, mountain-biking trails do not require mountains. Because of their length and rugged nature, however, these trails are more commonly found in county or regional parks near urban areas. Some cities locate mountain-biking trails on the periphery of city parks, where the ground is more rugged. Conquering rough terrain on a bicycle is one of the challenges that makes mountain biking an adventure.

The International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) works to provide and maintain mountain-biking opportunities for enthusiasts around the world. The organization supports low impact trails, encourages volunteers to assist with trail maintenance, and works with local, state, and national agencies to advocate for mountain bikers (IMBA, n.d.). Recent efforts to increase mountain-biking opportunities for their constituents include an agreement between IMBA and the National Park Service to increase trails at appropriate parks, and the acquisition of \$370 million from the Federal Highway Administration's Recreational Trails Program to build more trails (IMBA, n.d., ¶28). Support by organizations such as IMBA will continue to propel adventure recreation opportunities closer to home.

### Bouldering in Your Backyard

Bouldering is a form of rock climbing whereby the participant uses nothing but his or her shoes, chalk for handholds, and a crashpad which is placed below the climber in case of falls (Burg, 2005). Boulders, as they are called, attempt to solve the problem by either traversing across or climbing to the top of a large rock. Some problems are solved quickly with just a few moves, while others require numerous visits to the rock over the course of weeks or even months.

Many local, state, and national parks have the necessary resources for bouldering, because high cliffs are not necessary, just big rocks. From western parks like those found in Utah's Little Cottonwood Canyon to New York City's Central Park, bouldering is growing in popularity. Because of its low cost to participants, nearly anyone can participate. Moreover, there is little negative impact left on the environment (Burg, 2005). Bouldering is becoming so popular that many playground companies and businesses specializing in rock-climbing walls are manufacturing "boulders" specifically for placement in parks.

Examples of popular bouldering areas are Hueco Tanks State Park in El Paso, Texas, and Central Park in New York City. Standard bouldering etiquette includes leave-no-trace ethics such as the use of crash pads to protect the landing area of the climb, and no damage to the rock through the use of any implement. Burg (2005) notes that boulderers tend to be conscientious people who care about the environment.

### Kearney, Nebraska: A Case Study

The City of Kearney, Nebraska, a community of about 27,000 citizens, is located in south-central Nebraska along the Platte River. The city contains the usual complement of city parks and athletic fields, but its parks and recreation department is progressive in their philosophy, and is always looking for ways to provide new activities. By examining current community facilities, the city constantly considers how to use such facilities in new and different ways. They specifically look for nontraditional activities to attract youths who are not involved in competitive sports. "The more chances we give kids to do positive things, the better off we are" (N. Lewis, cited in Konz, 2002, p. 1A). An article in the local paper



The Tri-City BMX Association and local government cooperated to build a bicycle motocross track in Kearney, Nebraska (left). Oldfather Prairie Trail (right), in Cottonmill Park, uses marginal land to connect several neighborhoods and recreation venues, providing a wonderful biking and hiking resource for the people of Kearney.

discussed an undeveloped parcel of city land, 120 acres on the west edge of the city. Although plans were not concrete, ideas for the property included a skate park, a bicycle motocross area, a dog park, and a paintball area.

Not long after the article came out, a group of local skateboarders and their parents met with the director about the possibility of constructing the skate park. The discussion then went to the park board. A compromise about funding was worked out, and the skateboard group agreed to pay a third of the cost, with the remainder coming from city funds over a period of several years. A consulting firm was contacted, and a challenging skate park was designed.

Next, members of the Tri-City BMX Association approached the city of Kearney with a proposal for a bicycle motocross track. If the city would provide the land, the association would design the track and do all the construction work, mostly dirt moving, themselves. The city agreed, providing an exciting recreational opportunity to Kearney youths. The city provided the land, the dirt for the obstacles, irrigation, and parking for the venue, while the association designed and built the BMX track (Tri-City BMX, 2006).

Few people in Kearney had ever heard of disc golf until a group of university students approached the parks department about installing a course in one of the city parks (Moorman & Unruh, 2002). Students raised money from donors, helped write a grant from the Nebraska Recreation and Park Association, designed the nine-hole course, and helped the parks department to install it. It received so much use that soon after it opened, the tee boxes and areas under the baskets had to be hard-surfaced. Because of the demand for this nontraditional activity, an additional 18-hole course was installed in a larger park. Disc golf supplies are now sold at many local stores.

The Kearney Canal, which runs through the city of Kearney, is owned by the Nebraska Public Power District. It provides water for irrigation and hydroelectric power for the county. Water is diverted into the canal upstream from

the Platte River, and any water not used for irrigation passes through the hydroelectric plant and returns to the Platte farther downstream. When the land adjacent to the canal was being surveyed for a new city park, it was discovered that the canal was slightly out of its right-of-way. The canal had the necessary components of a whitewater course: water flow, vertical drops, and access to the area via the new park. It was suggested that since dirt work was to be done on the canal to re-direct it back into its right-of-way, the addition of some whitewater features would be a wonderful contribution to the recreation opportunities of the community, providing another example of the multiple use of an existing outdoor facility (N. Lewis, personal communication, August 23, 2006). The project goal is to make a whitewater park that is family-friendly, with several small obstacles whereby people learn the basics of rafting, canoeing, and kayaking. The whitewater park is in the early design and discussion phase of the project.

The Kearney hiking and biking trail was originally a 2.5-mile dirt trail that connected Cottonmill Park, a city park, with the local university. A four-phase construction plan was conceived to change the trail to a hard surface trail and extend it. Three phases have been completed to date. The trail begins at Cottonmill Park, two miles west of town, passes two golf courses, bisects the campus of the University of Nebraska at Kearney, follows the Kearney Canal through the 80-acre Yanney Heritage Park, turns to follow the north channel of the Platte River through the hotel district, and eastward to the Archway Monument. It will eventually connect with Ft. Kearney State Park, seven miles to the southeast.

The success of the trail is attributable to many factors. It is an all-weather trail, it passes through many different neighborhoods and housing areas, it connects several different recreation venues, and it circumvents many traditional boundaries (railroad tracks and busy roads) by passing underneath. It invites visitors staying in the local hotels to get off the beaten path and visit the heart of the city, and it is

a mecca for walkers, runners, bicyclists, and inline skaters. It has become so popular that it has created a demand for trails in other areas of the city. Rather than draining the budget of the recreation department just for trails, the city decided to include money for trails in the budget for roads and streets, adding an eight-foot-wide trail whenever streets were widened.

A recent occurrence demonstrates the power of popular demand. A housing developer recently visited the Kearney Park Board to discuss plans for a new housing addition. The new development would have a natural wetland and green space, in addition to a proposed hiking and biking trail that would connect with the existing trail system. The development would furnish the land and the construction costs of the trail if the city would maintain it in the future. The developer recognized that the outdoor opportunities provided by the trail would make that housing addition a much more desirable place to live.

### Pitfalls to Avoid

During the planning process for adventure facilities, be sure to allow a period for public comment on these areas. Some community residents will have issues with recreation facilities being built close to their homes, particularly facilities that offer nontraditional types of activities. Anything that is new and different may be viewed as strange and undesirable. Educating the public on these matters is very important.

As plans are being made for that new, professionally constructed, adventure recreation area, those proposing it should make sure that the activity is more than just a short-lived trend in their community. Trendy activities may spark intense participation for a few years, but then interest fades. Finding ways to keep older participants involved and interest in the activity perpetuated in younger members of the community will prevent the wonderful new facility from falling into disuse, and the community from spending a lot of money with little outcome.

### Programming Implications

Adventure recreation facilities, if well designed and maintained, have the potential to increase physical activity and improve the quality of life in communities by bringing exciting, nontraditional recreation opportunities closer to home. Recreation professionals can capitalize on these opportunities by offering quality instructional programs that teach enthusiasts the basics, including safety and environmental concerns. Such programs can help participants to build their skills to face the challenges available at particular venues. More important, however, such programs may influence participants to the extent that they will want to continue participating throughout their life and to seek adventure activities in other areas, such as state and national parks and recreation areas.

### Summary

As the need for exciting new outdoor activities close to cit-

ies continues to rise, recreation professionals can respond with quality facilities and programs that address the needs of their busy populations. To facilitate your own adventure recreation areas, start at the grass-roots level by keeping the public up-to-date on plans for public lands and closely examining existing facilities for potential new uses. Often the development of one activity area will create a demand for other facilities. Adventure recreation venues can provide opportunities for all people to increase their physical activity and improve the quality of life in communities by bringing exciting, nontraditional recreation opportunities close to home.

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