



# Alternatives to Closure & Preparation for Recovery:

Visitor Management Options for Parks and Trails Managers in a Transitioning COVID-19 World

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In times of stress, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, people turn to the outdoors and nature for its restorative mental and physical benefits. Being outdoors in nature builds and replenishes an individual's mental resiliency; in fact, recent studies suggest that access to nature can decrease stress, increase recovery rates, and mitigate negative health outcomes such as cardiovascular disorders, obesity, and depression. Considering the public health measures that have been imposed on Canadians over the past weeks in response to COVID-19, it is easy - perhaps now more than ever - to understand and appreciate the value society places on parks, access to nature and outdoor recreation.

Federal and Provincial health officers have been clear: physical distancing, good hand hygiene, respiratory etiquette, cleaning and honest self-monitoring and isolation are non-negotiable if we are to flatten the curve, minimize the risk of resurgence and reduce even more serious health and economic outcomes. Park managers, recognizing the importance of providing residents with access to nature and the outdoors, now find themselves in an incredibly challenging situation. On one hand, park managers understand the potential of parks, trails and open spaces to help residents cope with the mental and physical

challenges associated with physical distancing, isolation and other essential public health measures. On the other, some of these spaces and places – if unmanaged – can and have become places where residents do not or cannot abide by public health guidelines and requirements.

Given the availability of better information and data about the virus and growing concerns about the longer-term impact of mass quarantines on mental and physical wellness, professors David J. Finch and David Legg from Mount Royal University recently released an article calling on local and provincial governments to refine the blanket closure of parks, recreation and public places that some jurisdictions have applied. (<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/game-canada-needs-evidence-based-covid-19-wellbeing-play-finch-phd/>) Though the article proposes four actionable recommendations, the recommendations are general in nature. The intent of this article is to identify more specific actions that municipal and regional parks and trails managers might consider taking to better position themselves to continue providing residents with access to outdoor spaces in a way that complies with current public health guidelines and requirements. At the very least, this article will help parks and trails managers prepare for the probable new visitor management realities they will be asked to address in response to COVID-19.

## Inconsistent Approaches to Response

Health officer messaging regarding the appropriateness of visiting parks, open spaces and trails has been vague and inconsistent from province to province. As a result, local park managers have independently interpreted public health direction and taken a divergent range of management actions. The result has been a high degree of variation and inconsistency in approaches, even when municipalities share borders. The lack of clarity has allowed societal opinion and pressure to emerge and, though well-intentioned, many individuals are making assumptions about appropriate behaviors in spite of what some provincial health officers are directing. The lack of consistency may be leading to unnecessary disparities between jurisdictions.

## Increasing Visitation

With Federal and Provincial leaders signaling that physical distancing measures may need to be in place for multiple months, and as weather warms, it is reasonable to expect intensifying public pressure to enable and support access to local parks and trails in ways that comply with public health mandates. Canada's parks system is an integrated network comprised of different park management agencies. Though independently managed, the system is connected, and actions taken by one agency can affect other agencies. The closure of National Parks and Provincial Parks has and will continue to intensify demand on local and regional parks and trails – particularly for those jurisdictions that border National and Provincial Parks. In fact, many park and outdoor recreation agencies are already indicating that they are experiencing peak summer season demand in early spring. The increased density of use is likely to result in increased challenges to maintaining physical distancing in local and regional parks. And, as travel restrictions begin to relax, the tourism industry will begin to promote short-haul domestic travel to stimulate the tourism sector - regional and local parks, open spaces and trails will almost certainly experience even greater visitation. These spaces will be viewed as critical to supporting a rebound in the tourism sector and its recovery. Park managers will be expected to enable visitation in keeping with public health requirements in order to support economic recovery. Park managers must be prepared for an even greater influx of visitors as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves in the coming months.

Images of crowded beaches and parks immediately following the announcement of physical distancing requirements were met with public outcry. These are not the behaviors or visitor patterns our communities need or can manage right now. However, it is also important to acknowledge that in many cases parks and open spaces are traditionally passively managed. With limited active management implemented to help visitors adjust their behaviors, it was not surprising to see such images of crowded beaches and parks early in the response. It is critical that park managers and elected officials acknowledge that with the need to change public behavior in parks and on trails also comes the need to change how we manage people in parks and on trails. Through this article, we offer active management ideas while also pointing out that the management decisions of parks, trails and open spaces should be dynamic and, as such, management decisions that were made weeks ago should continue to be reviewed and evolve as our knowledge of the COVID-19 situation grows and improves.

## Active Management and the Visitor Management Toolbox

While the immediate jump to closing parks and trails may have been the easiest and most straightforward response, such a response removes one of the most significant opportunities that the parks and recreation sector has to help residents build and sustain their mental and physical resiliency to comply with physical distancing measures. Parks, trails and the outdoors should be positioned as a strategy to help residents endure the social and physical restrictions.

The most successful approaches for managing visitors to parks and trails during the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to be ones that apply a comprehensive suite of visitor management tools (see Figure 1) rather than focusing on a single tool such as closures. Park managers should be looking at how they can integrate adjustments to site design and infrastructure, visitor education, regulation, enforcement, evaluation, and monitoring through a strategic municipal wide visitor management plan. While there is much uncertainty surrounding the mid-term implications of COVID-19, what is almost certain is that the way we managed visitation to our parks and trails pre-pandemic is unlikely to suffice in the interim or in the foreseeable future.

By developing a comprehensive and well thought out visitor management plan, park managers are able to appropriately apply the many tools within the visitor management ‘toolbox’. Eight tools are outlined below that may be of particular value. These tools can be considered and adopted individually, but will be most effective when they are integrated and applied collectively within a broader visitor management plan.

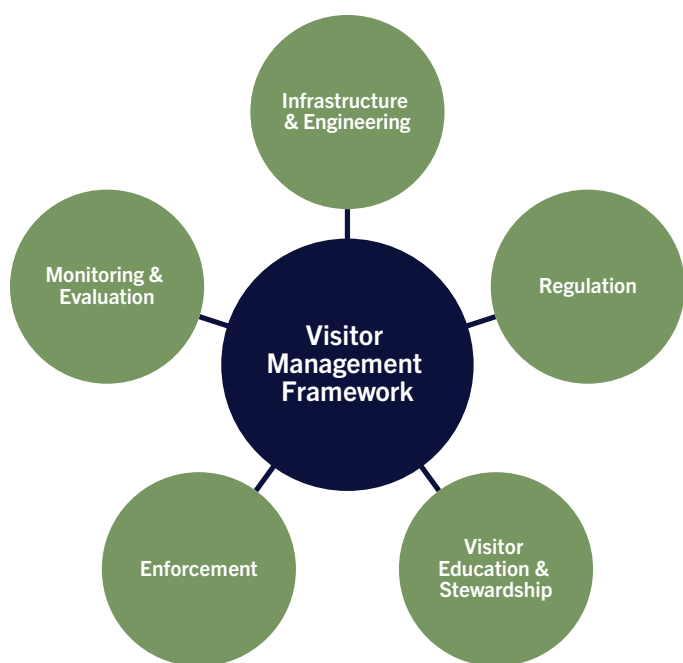


Figure 1 A Comprehensive Visitor Management Approach

## Eight Visitor Management Tools

### 1. Temporarily Adjust Site Designs & Permitted Uses to Support Physical Distancing

Current site designs and configurations may unintentionally push visitors close together and even create situations where crowding is unavoidable. Strategically reviewing site designs may reveal opportunities to make temporary adjustments to better allow visitors to adhere to physical distancing requirements. Parking orientation and density can be altered, gateways and entry points can be temporarily redesigned to be more permeable, seating areas can be re-oriented, trails can be converted to one-way travel, queuing prompts can be developed at boat

launches, and high-touch surfaces can be reconsidered and removed or closed if they cannot be sanitized. The types of activities permitted can be temporarily adjusted to enable the highest amount of use while still maintaining physical distance. In addition, lanes or roadways adjacent to popular parks, trails and pathways in areas of high population density can be temporarily closed to allow recreation and active transportation to occur in lower-density patterns.

### 2. Actively Disperse Visitors Throughout the Park System

Adopted from recent approaches in tourism, visitor dispersion is a purposeful strategy to move visitors from high-demand destinations to lower-demand destinations. Public communication, on-site communication, mobile device applications, social media and web posts, and even live webcams can be used to tell visitors how busy a site is at any given time. Such communication provides visitors with information needed to self-select alternative sites. As sites become busier, park managers can utilize these communication tools to promote visitors to go to other sites with similar features, amenities and visitor experiences that are less busy. Communications should consider how dispersion strategies will affect potential emergency response, environmental sensitivity, wildfire risk etc. and work to disperse visitors to sites in the system where these risks are manageable.

### 3. Establish Visitor Carrying Capacities for the Busiest Parks and Trails

Carrying capacity is the maximum amount of visitor use that an area can accommodate while still achieving desired conditions. Though most often applied to manage the quality of the visitor experience (e.g. crowding), and, to a lesser extent, environmental impacts, carrying capacity is an effective concept for park managers to ensure physical distancing. Though likely most appropriate for the most desired/popular parks and trails, parks and trail managers can strategically determine a general number of visitors that each site can reasonably accommodate while still allowing visitors to maintain required distancing. Capacities should be set based on the unique characteristics of each site. Rather than closing sites, actively managing visitor capacities similar to how public transportation is now being managed can be effective.

## 4. Provide Essential Infrastructure that Allows Visitor to Minimize Transmission

Providing and maintaining temporary sanitation stations for visitors to wash or disinfect their hands, particularly where they enter the park and after unavoidable high-touch surfaces (e.g. gates), can bring greater confidence to visitors while making a meaningful difference in transmission.

Though many park managers have closed their washroom facilities, in some cases, these washrooms provide important hygiene infrastructure for vulnerable populations and closing access to them or reducing services in them can increase risk of transmission for these populations. In addition, as has been implemented in the retail sector, parks and trail managers could consider installing physical distancing prompts and directions at congestion points. Icons, stickers, and other identifiers placed on the ground or at viewpoints or near common gathering areas can prompt and remind visitors to maintain their distance.

## 5. Actively Educate Visitors and Demonstrate Appropriate Behaviours

While initial pictures of crowding public park spaces elicited outrage, changing well-engrained social behaviors can take time. With the reality of COVID-19 in Canada now established, visitors are in a much better position to receive education on why and how to change behavior and adjust accordingly. Undesirable visitor behavior occurs most often due to visitors being uninformed, unskilled or having bad habits. Rarely are undesirable behaviors the result of visitors simply choosing to ignore the rules. It is important to recognize that some undesirable behaviours are the result of poor site designs and configurations and poor visitor management. Visitor education programs can be effective in promoting proper user behavior in parks.

Park and trail managers should be actively developing strategic visitor education programs. Recreation facility staff can be redeployed to visitor education roles in parks and trails. Education programs should reach visitors before they depart for parks or trails, once they arrive at their destination, while they are engaged in the park or trail, as well as provide messaging after they have departed to share their experience with others. Park signage, handouts, staff presence, social media campaigns, blogs, online videos, picture campaigns showing desirable behaviours, and other strategies provide opportunities to adjust visitor behaviour and reinforce

physical distancing and encourage local park and trail use. The use of peer groups and influencers can strengthen user message acceptance ever further. Use of visitor pledges, an emerging visitor management tactic, can be tailored and applied to encourage visitors to make a public pledge to apply the physical distancing requirements.

## 6. Backstop Indirect Visitor Management Actions with Regulation & Enforcement

Regulation and ensuing enforcement are important management tactics that backstop other more indirect strategies. Many jurisdictions are now delegating authority to enforce physical distance requirements and other public health measures to municipalities. However, enforcement should not be the initial or primary approach for interacting with visitors in parks and on trails. In the context of a broader visitor management strategy, parks managers should work with enforcement officers to devise tactics for using compliance tools including officer presence, verbal and written warnings and violation tickets. Driven by the goal to shift behavior and generate commitment to long-term behaviour change, issuing violations should be a last resort. Verbal and written warnings and education have a much better chance of achieving commitment to behavioural change than violation tickets. Enforcement officer capacity is also limited in all municipalities. Efforts should be coordinated between park managers and bylaw programs to direct enforcement efforts to areas of greatest priority and during peak periods of use where there is the greatest chance of influencing the greatest number of visitors.

Temporary closure of park access in periods of peak demand (e.g. sunny weekend periods) and/or at the highest demand parks should be considered if management strategies discussed above will not ensure appropriate visitor use and behavior.

## 7. If Closure is the Only Option, Keep Residents Connected to their Parks... Virtually

Some jurisdictions may direct municipalities to close parks in the coming days and weeks. It is also important to acknowledge that vulnerable populations who once enjoyed parks and outdoor spaces may no longer be able to do so. To keep residents connected to parks and outdoor spaces

without being able to physically visit them, parks and trail managers can provide opportunities for visitors to connect virtually. Social media photo campaigns where residents share their favorite pictures of parks and trails, online visitor videos, staff videos, online interpretation games and activities or virtual tours and webcams are cost effective ways to help visitors stay connected with their outdoor spaces. Such virtualization efforts may prove beneficial over the long-term to help inspire people to get back out and active once it becomes safe to do so.

## 8. Start Your Recovery Marketing and Communications Planning Now

The time will come when public health measures begin to ease. However, even when measures are relaxed or lifted, some residents may remain fearful of spaces where people gather, worrying that others are infected, and that sanitation is insufficient. Efforts will be needed to re-build trust and confidence of residents to gather in public. Parks, trails and open spaces are among some of the most critical gathering places. Fear can be greatly reduced by avoiding outright closures in the first place. Though most resources are being consumed with the response, parks and trail managers will need to develop new marketing and communication strategies in the immediate period following COVID-19 to reinforce that visitors are safe in parks and open spaces. Working collaboratively with local public health authorities, preparations for these marketing and communications plans should begin now – before public health measures are lifted – so as to be implemented in lockstep with the relaxing and lifting of restrictions.

## Consistency, Coordination & Collaboration

While the highly variable approach to visitor management applied in the Country is understandable as communities scrambled to respond to the outbreak, it is now essential that parks managers take a more coordinated, collective and transparent approach to visitor management. Clear principles and conditions should be developed to help guide and provide for better consistency across Canada's parks and trails systems. There is a great opportunity for provincial parks and recreation organizations to help provide for this coordination and better enable and

support consistency as the pandemic continues forward. There has never been a greater need to be communicating with neighbouring jurisdictions and land managers.

## Closing Thoughts

Parks, trails and open spaces are essential public services. Like other service providers, parks and trail managers and agencies are being significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, residents are increasingly looking to parks and trails as beacons of hope, places for restoration and spaces where they can escape from pressures and fears, even if just for a short time. It is critical that residents can access these spaces and places at a time when they most need them. Parks and trail managers have an opportunity to adopt new tools and approaches to manage parks, trails, open spaces and visitors within them to ensure continued public access to these important services and strong adherence to public health measures. These spaces and places, if actively managed, are not and should not be viewed as problematic to broader societal efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19. By taking a strategic approach to actively manage visitors to our parks and trail, many of the risks posed by inappropriate user behavior can be mitigated and the benefits preserved. Such an approach will require a concerted effort on the part of parks and trails managers, many of whom are already stretched thin, buy-in from political leaders, and clear, consistent messaging from higher levels of government. Leaders and public health officials have made it clear, the coming weeks and months will not be easy for Canadians; however, the resiliency and strength gained through safely accessing parks and nature will better enable society to accept and respond to this unprecedented challenge.



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