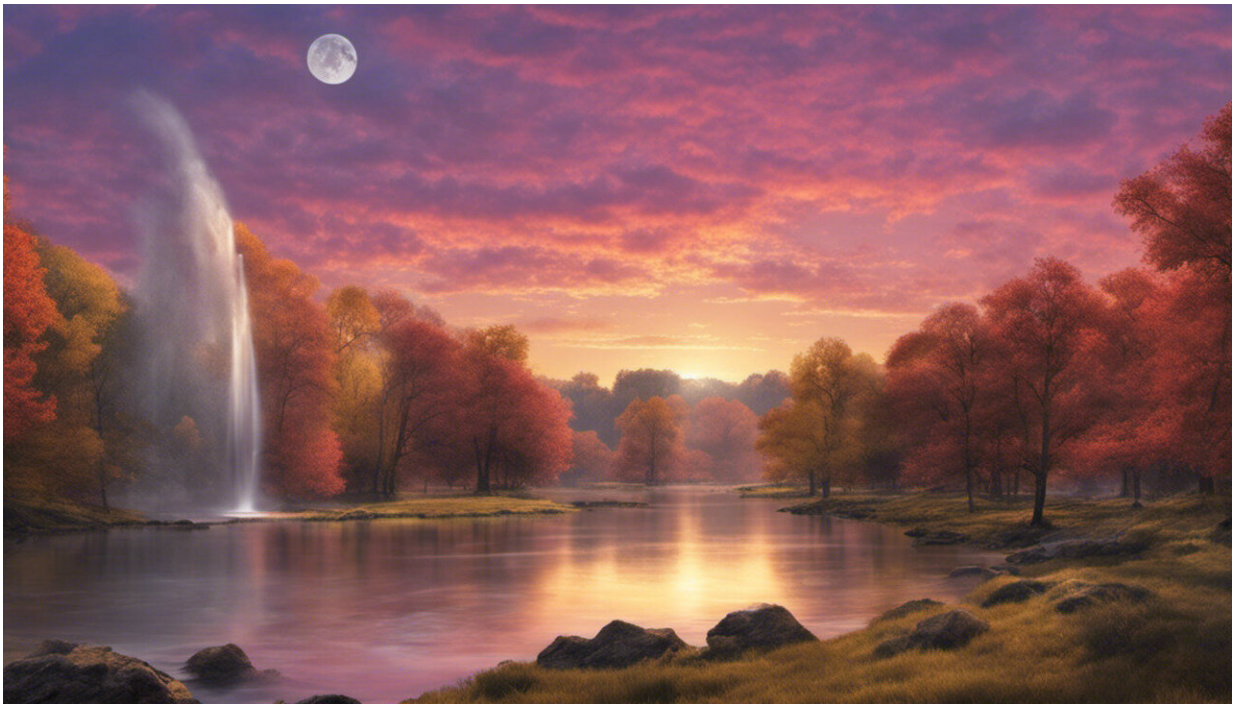


# Americans' support for parks remains steady, according to study

February 15 2016, by Jennifer Miller

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A lot has changed in America since the 1990s.

Cell phones are now "smart." Watches don't just tell time, they track heart rates, calories burned, even how well we sleep. America's demographic composition is older, more urban, and more diverse.

So, when Penn State researchers set out in 2015 to study Americans' use and perceptions of local parks and recreation services—as a follow-up to an earlier 1991 Penn State study—they weren't sure what to expect.

"Our growing fondness for electronic entertainment coupled with an increasing push to privatize public services might lead one to believe that support for parks and recreation would decline. That belief turns out to be false," said Andrew Mowen, associate professor of recreation, [park](#), and tourism management and lead study investigator. "Americans' use and perceptions of local government parks and recreation remain as strong as ever."

Comparisons between the 1991 and 2015 studies indicate nearly identical levels of park visitation and recreation program participation. Further, a majority of Americans—83 percent—believe they and their communities benefit from municipal-managed parks and recreation services, such as playgrounds, athletic fields, trails, pools, sports leagues, community races, charity fundraisers, festivals, summer programs and senior centers.

"In fact, the extent to which Americans said they benefited a great deal from local parks actually increased between the two time periods," said Alan Graefe, professor of recreation, park, and tourism management and co-investigator on both the 1991 and 2015 studies. "Park benefits were reported by a majority of Americans regardless of their demographic profile or political ideology."

When local government officials face financial difficulties, it is often park and recreation budgets that are first to the chopping block. Yet, the 2015 study showed that four out of five Americans were willing to pay the national average amount in local taxes—\$70 per household member per year—for park and recreation services. Tax support for local parks was bipartisan and included those who did not even use these services.

"Two-thirds of non-users felt these services were worth this investment, dispelling the myth that parks are only valued by those who use them," said Austin Barrett, doctoral candidate and co-investigator for the 2015 study.

Why do Americans consider local parks and recreation services beneficial? Respondents cited a number of reasons, with health and physical fitness leading the way as the most important benefit.

"It used to be that the public saw parks and recreation services as just fun and games. However, Americans are telling us these services provide important physical and mental health benefits," Mowen said.

Researchers said 25 years ago public health officials did not recognize the connection between parks and health.

"In the last 10 years, park and recreation research has been published in health and fitness related academic journals," said Geoffrey Godbey, lead investigator from the 1991 study and collaborator on the 2015 study and professor emeritus at Penn State. "Health organizations are also seeing the value of partnering with park and [recreation](#) agencies. There's a real synergy that is emerging."

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) commissioned Penn State to conduct both studies. Researchers completed their 2015 report in January. The full report, along with an executive summary, are [publicly available on the NRPA website](#).

**More information:** Americans' Broad-Based Support for Local Recreation and Park Services: [www.nrpa.org/americans-support-parks/](http://www.nrpa.org/americans-support-parks/)

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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