

Is It a Trail or Is It a Playground?

An Evaluation of the Sherose Island Nature Trail

Final Report 2022

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*An ocean of
opportunity*





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Is It a Trail or Is It a Playground?

An Evaluation of the Sherose Island Nature Trail

This study was designed to gain a better understanding of community perspectives of the Sherose Island Nature Trail, located in the Municipality of Barrington in Nova Scotia.



MULTIPLE METHODS WERE USED TO CAPTURE A RANGE OF COMMUNITY VIEWS, INCLUDING AN ONLINE SURVEY, A PHOTOGRAPHY CHALLENGE, INTERVIEWS, OBSERVATIONS, AND PHOTOSTORIES WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH.

TOP PERCEIVED BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN



1 Playing outdoors / nature play



2 Physical activity



3 Mental break/ mental wellbeing



4 Meeting other children

TOP REASONS FOR VISITING THE TRAIL



1 Being outdoors



2 Time with family/friends



3 Physical activity



4 Mental wellbeing

CORRESPONDINGLY

TOP PERCEIVED BENEFITS IDENTIFIED



1 Physical activity



2 Time with family/friends



3 Mental wellbeing



4 Being outdoors

Prominent trail activities and experiences for children and teens:

Exploring the painted rocks

Venturing the trails

Outdoor play

Nature/risky play, such as playing on the side trails and in the mud, and climbing on rocks and trees

The study reveals there is potential for taking an innovative approach to reimagining the trail beyond a 'traditional understanding of a nature trail' to consider other ways of reconnecting with nature through play, recreation, and leisure for people of all ages.

The findings highlight the possibilities for the trail to be a natural playground for outdoor, nature, and risky play.

Outdoor play is broadly defined as play that takes place outdoors. Nature play is play that takes place in a natural environment or involving interaction with natural materials. Risky play is "a form of play that is thrilling and exciting, which involves uncertainty, unpredictability, and varying degrees of risk-taking."¹

Benefits include: fostering creativity, resilience, socio-emotional learning, cognitive development, mental health, physical health and risk negotiation skills, connection to nature, environmental awareness, amongst others²³⁴

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **Develop and share** collective values and vision for the trail to support outdoor, nature, risky, and intergenerational play
2. **Create programs and partnerships** across sectors to help reduce barriers to connect community with nature
3. **Create an accessible nature trail** that is an inclusive community space for diverse experiences in nature
4. **Seek ongoing support and resources** for future trail development and community recreation programming



The full report may be accessed [here](#).

¹ Lee, E.Y., et al. (2022, p. 12). Play, learn, and teach outdoors-network (PLaTO-Net): Terminology, taxonomy, and ontology. The International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 19(1), 66-66. ² Brussoni, M. (n.d.). Outdoor risky play. Retrieved from the OECDLibrary, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/>. ³ Little, H. (2017). Risk-taking in outdoor play: Challenges and possibilities. In H. Little, S. Elliot & S. Wyer (Eds.), Outdoor learning environments: Spaces for exploration, discovery and risk-taking in the early years (pp. 19-38). Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin. ⁴ Chawla, L., Keena, K., Pevec, I., & Stanley, E. (2014). Green schoolyards as havens from stress and resources for resilience in childhood and adolescence. Health & Place, 28, 1-13.



Executive Summary

This report presents the findings from an evaluation study initiated by the Municipality of Barrington to explore community use and perceived impact of the Sherose Island Nature Trail.

Purpose: The evaluation was designed to elicit and understand community perspectives of the trail to help guide future planning in relation to space design and programming, and was guided by three key objectives: 1) to identify how the trail is currently being used; 2) to gain a deeper understanding of community members' experiences of the trail, including their motivations, perceived benefits, and leisure or play experiences; and 3) to examine community members' recommendations for the future development.

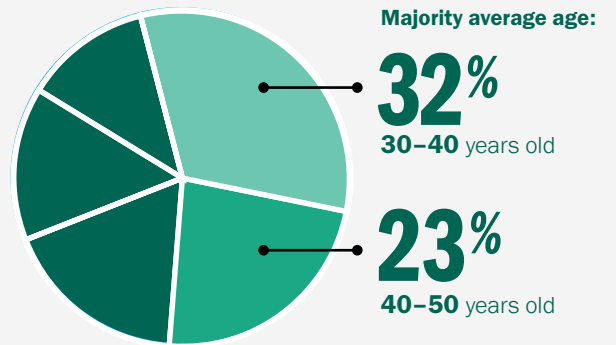
Evaluation Study Design: Multiple methods were used to capture a range of community views, including an online survey, a photography challenge, semi-structured interviews, targeted observations, and young people's photostories. Data was collected from November 2021 – May 2022, with participant recruitment carried out through online communication by website, social media, and email, as well as purposeful sampling of key stakeholders.

Key Findings:

163 responses to the online community survey (providing demographic information of those currently accessing the trail)

77% spend 30–60 minutes (on average) on the trail (each visit)

10–30 minutes average time spent driving to the trail



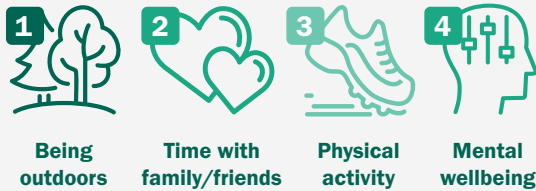
34% visit 1–3 times a month, and **30%** visit less than once a month.

When asked to list who they visit the trail with, most respondents (**84.2%**) stated that they use the trail with their family, while **24.8%** described using the trail with friends, **20%** reported they used the trail with their pet, and **9.09%** reported using the trail alone. Note that some respondents used the trail in more than one of the ways named above, such as with family and friends.

Respondents indicated they participate in various programs on the trail, including holiday events, activities related to painted rocks, and organized programs. The most frequently reported activities on the trail included walking/hiking (**96%**), looking for painted rocks or painting rocks for the trail (**86%**), and looking at nature (**45%**).



TOP REASONS FOR VISITING THE TRAIL



CORRESPONDINGLY

TOP PERCEIVED BENEFITS IDENTIFIED



Prominent trail activities and experiences for young people:

Exploring the painted rocks

Venturing the trails

Outdoor play

Nature/risky play, such as playing on the side trails and in the mud, and climbing on rocks and trees

88% of survey respondents reported they did not experience any barriers to accessing the trail

AND

64% reported there were no changes or improvements they would like to see on the trail

Highlights: The results from the study indicate the Sherose Island Nature Trail is enjoyed and appreciated by the local community members, and there has been a renewed focus on engaging the community in using the trail space. Recently, this focus on community trail use has been influenced by new Recreation Department staff using the trail more intentionally and purposefully for programming and supporting community-led initiatives, and community members introducing new features and trail activities, such as painted rocks and holiday events. Educational groups have also started visiting the trail, including early childhood centres and a high school outdoor education class.

Three interconnected themes were identified during data analysis through the process of thematic coding that represent community members' experiences on the trail and the perceived impact of these experiences, including:

1. a space that promotes intergenerational health and wellbeing;
2. a space to explore outdoor, nature, and risky play; and
3. a space to foster community-building and place-making.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that while the majority of community members visit the trail to walk/hike, there are countless

opportunities to use, move, and be in the space in many different ways. In particular, the findings from the young people, as well as those who visit the trail with children highlight the potential for the trail and surrounding green space to be a natural park or playground for outdoor, nature, and risky play. Such a space would be intentional in its design and purpose to be accessible, while creating opportunities for people of all ages to reconnect with nature and the natural features of the trail. There is an exciting opportunity for continued community development and partnership building focused on creating a trail that connects people with community and nature.



Rocks are often left in memory or recognition of important people in one's life.



Summary of Recommendations:

The key recommendations that stem from this study are to:

1

Develop and share collective values and a vision for the trail. This may include taking an innovative approach to reimagining the trail beyond a traditional understanding of a 'nature trail' by:

- engaging community to develop and share values and vision for the trail, as well as for programs that may be offered on the trail, such as promoting outdoor recreation, physical activity, outdoor, nature, risky, and intergenerational play, connection to nature, and Indigenous history of the land and land-based learning.
- advocating for the child's right to play as enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; and prioritizing time, space, and freedom for children to play in community recreation spaces and programming.
- collaborate with key stakeholders to create opportunities for public awareness-raising and capacity building to support and implement outdoor, nature, and risky play
- develop a departmental or municipal play policy to demonstrate a commitment to providing structured and unstructured play opportunities for all children in the community.
- creating a more detailed website for the trail to raise public awareness, advocate for, and share this vision.

2

Create programs and partnerships to help reduce barriers and connect community with nature. It is recommended that these programs continue and when feasible:

- consider the prioritization and feasibility of participants' recommendations.
- strengthen partnerships with community groups, early childhood, schools for outdoor learning, and Indigenous communities, in particular to develop and expand environmental and sustainability education and land-based education curricula.
- provide clear information and guidelines for planning and decision-making, and processes for organizing community events.
- conduct ongoing evaluation of programs to assess program effectiveness and participant experiences.
- explore research partnerships for ongoing examination of the development of the trail, and the lived experiences and outcomes of participants.

3

Create an accessible and inclusive nature trail. It is recommended to:

- refer to relevant accessibility and inclusion guidelines; conduct an accessibility audit; ensure consideration of physical, social, cultural, and economic factors.
- examine the need and feasibility of additional supports for trail use.
- undertake an outreach strategy to further develop and promote the trail as an inclusive space.
- establish and share a framework for addressing safety on the trail, including outdoor play considerations for structured and unstructured play, and programming; implement related program/experience risk-benefit assessment processes.
- consider creating new spaces and pathways.
- consider the prioritization and feasibility of participants' recommendations.

4

Provide ongoing support and seek new resources for trail development. It is recommended that:

- activities, programs, and personnel associated with the trail continue to be supported and expanded.
- seek additional funding and resources to create new staff positions to support the identified values and vision for the trail/community recreation programming; in particular, consider the role of play workers/leaders to inspire ongoing creativity and exploration for intergenerational play.
- resources and funding be pursued and allocated to future trail development and ongoing maintenance, so that the trail may be accessed and enjoyed by all.



1 Context

Broadly, the health benefits derived from nature contact have gained prominence in recent years (Frumkin et al., 2017). Contemporary evidence-based literature validates the benefits of nature immersion and green exercise enriching wellbeing and health (Franco et al., 2017; Kingsley & Townsend, 2006). Widespread research has also identified strong causal links towards health promoting behaviours resulting from immersion in natural settings (Firth et al., 2011; Lanier et al., 2015; Truong et al., 2018; Wakefield, et al., 2007). The myriad of gains which have been acknowledged include stress reduction, improved mood states, accelerated healing, attention restoration, development of perceptual and expressive skills, cognitive enhancement, productivity and heightening of imagination and creativity, to name just a few (Dannenberg, et al., 2011; Gray & Birrell, 2014).

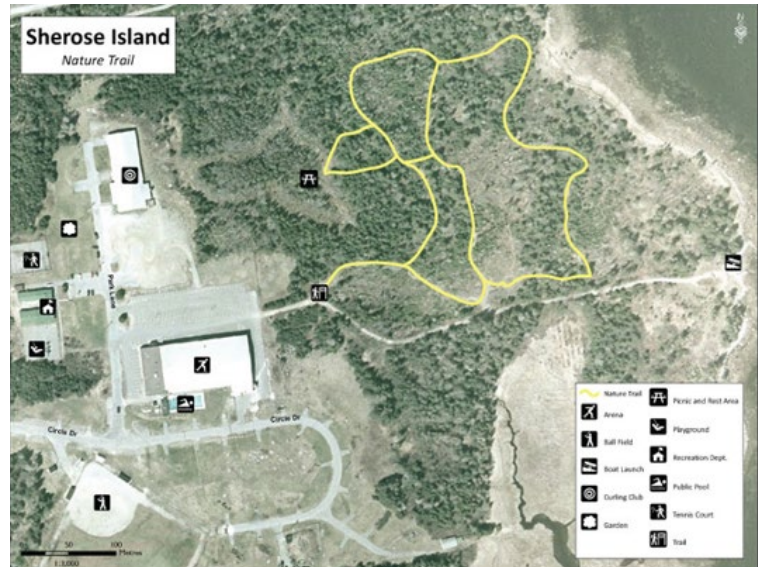
Green spaces and parks have been found to be beneficial in developing social connections with others and building a sense of community (Hurly & Walker, 2019). Community green spaces such as community gardens have assisted community members to develop social connections, provide an opportunity to contribute to the community, as well as an opportunity to develop a sense of community (Truong, et al., 2022). Being able to engage and participate in the development of community natural spaces has been found to assist individuals to in developing sense of place, and positive place attachments. This in turn has been associated with positive well-being and community health outcomes.

The positive influence of nature, green space, and outdoor activities on children and adolescents has been well researched and summarised in the literature (see Africa et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2022; Mann et al., 2022; Selhub & Logan, 2012; Truong, et al., 2016). Outdoor play spaces refer to any outdoor area where individuals can play, and can include different dimensions of outdoor play such as active play, free play, nature play, risky play, and social play.

Outdoor play is broadly defined as play that takes place outdoors, and nature play, as play that takes place in a natural environment or involving interaction with natural materials; risky play is defined as “a form of play that is thrilling and exciting, which involves uncertainty, unpredictability, and varying degrees of risk-taking” (Lee et al., 2022, p. 12). Previous research shows improvements in children’s physical development, social interactions, and positive affective states as a result of outdoor activities in nature (Little, 2017). Children’s executive functioning (Schutte et al., 2017), ability to assess risks (Dowdell et al., 2011; Malone, 2013), and the development of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (Chawla & Cushing, 2007; Chawla, et al., 2014) is also enhanced when they spend time in nature.

1.1 The Sherose Island Nature Trail:

A recent anecdotal account of the trail indicates that it was first developed in 2007 and last updated in 2016. A large sign and map were installed at the trail head, which is adjacent to the Barrington Municipal Arena parking lot. Previous initiatives to engage the community with the trail included school groups naming sections of the trail, with signs and a map installed. In 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, a community member approached Municipality of Barrington staff to ask if they could introduce painted rocks to the trail, and create a Facebook group for community members to participate in the initiative as well. This resulted in increased use of the trail during a unique time of public health restrictions and social distancing, where outdoor activities were increasingly encouraged over indoor social gatherings. Community members remain active in partnership with the Recreation Department in their creation of painted rocks, as well as their development and implementation of trail events and programs.



Source: <https://www.barringtonmunicipality.com/Visiting-Us/trails>

Municipality of Barrington staff were interested in conducting an evaluation to examine how the trail is currently being used, and consultations from community stakeholders to inform future planning on space use and development. The purpose of this evaluation was to systematically collect information on the current state of the nature trail, how the space is being used, and community ideas for future trail development.



2 Evaluation Study Design

2.1 Purpose:

The evaluation study was designed to elicit and understand community perspectives of the trail to help guide future planning in relation to space design and programming. The evaluation was guided by three key objectives:

1. To identify how the trail is currently being used and key users/stakeholders;
2. To gain a deeper understanding of community members' experiences of the trail as a natural public space, including their motivations, perceived sense of wellbeing, enjoyment/appreciation of nature, and leisure or play; and
3. To examine community members' views and recommendations for the future development of the trail.

2.2 Data Collection Methods & Community Participation:

The data collection methods were developed after initial discussions and consultation with Municipality of Barrington staff. The following evaluation activities were carried out from November 2021 – May 2022, using a variety of methods to capture a range of community views, including an online survey, a photography challenge, semi-structured interviews, targeted observations, and young people's photostories. Figure 1 provides an overview of the data collection activities.

Figure 1: Data Collection Methods & Participant Numbers

Method	Participants	Number
Online Survey	Community Members	163
Virtual Photo Challenge	Community Members	11
Semi-structured Interviews	6 Community Members 2 Recreation Department Staff	8
Photostories	17 Children 4 Youth	21
	Total	203
Targeted Observations	2-day Field Visit	1 Early Childhood Group; 2 Community Groups/Programs

2.2.1 ONLINE COMMUNITY SURVEY:

An online survey was created using an online software program. The anonymous survey included 17 multi-choice, ranking, and open-ended questions that examined participant's demographic information, trail use, benefits and challenges encountered from using the trail, as well as future trail recommendations. The link to the survey was open for three weeks between January and February 2022, and was posted and advertised on the Recreation Department Facebook page.

2.2.2 PHOTO CHALLENGE:

At the time that the survey was open between January and February 2022, a virtual photo challenge also took place. The photo challenge was advertised through the Recreation Department Facebook page. Participants were asked to select a photo that best represented their favourite aspect of the trail. Along with the photo, participants were asked to include a short description (maximum 250 words) to describe the photo, where it was taken on the trail, why they selected the photo, and why the photo best represents their favourite part of the trail.

2.2.3 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS:

Interviews were held with community members and Recreation Department staff to gain a deeper understanding of participants' trail use experiences and recommendations for future development. Semi-structured interview questions were used to create discussion focused on community members' use of the trail, how the trail is being used by the Recreation Department staff, benefits and challenges they have experienced using the trail, as well as future recommendations for the trail and trail programs. Interviews were held virtually with a project team member, lasted approximately 25–60min, and were recorded and auto-transcribed. Community members were recruited to participate in interviews through indicating that they were interested in participating following the survey, as well as personal invitation from the recreation director. A total of 18 survey respondents indicated they were interested in participating in an interview. After following-up with respondents, a total of eight individuals took part in an interview, including one educator, two community members with past involvement of organizing trail activities, three community trail users, and two Recreation Department staff.

2.2.4 TARGETED OBSERVATIONS:

Field visits were held on the trail with an early childhood group and two community programs for school-aged children. The visits were conducted over two days in late November 2021. The project team was able to observe, record field notes, and conduct photostory activities with young people ranging from primary to junior high school. The four observers used an observation guide designed to



systematically document the various play behaviours observed while they were engaged in free play and structured games. In particular, the guide was used to document observed play activities, socio-emotional observations of interactions with peers and adults, and interaction with the natural environment. Additionally, the targeted observations helped to identify the various types of movement behaviours, such as fundamental movement skills and outdoor literacy skills, as children moved throughout the trail and forested areas. The observers completed an orientation prior to the field visit, as well as a debrief and collaborative analysis of observations following the field visit.

2.2.5 YOUNG PEOPLE'S PHOTOSTORIES:

There is a large body of literature acknowledging children's agency and ability to meaningfully engage in research related to their everyday environments and play spaces (see Lloyd et al., 2018; Malone, et al., 2014; Truong, 2012, 2017).

A modified process of walking interviews, also referred to as go-along interviews, and photostory was used on the trail with children to capture insight into the way they view and use the trail. This was conducted during the field visits and after the targeted observations were completed. During their visit children walked around the trail in small groups of 4-6 along with a research assistant and were invited to use a tablet to take photos of their favourite areas and elements of the trail. As they walked along the trail, the research assistants asked the children to describe how they liked to play in different parts of the trail, and why they liked the feature of the trail that they photographed. In total, 21 young people from three separate groups participated in the photostory process. These descriptions and observations were recorded by research assistants.



TOP: An Escape Room concept takes to the trail. Participants solved puzzles to move along to the next checkpoint.

MIDDLE/BOTTOM: Community members continue to be engaged through Facebook where they can post pictures of themselves, and/or rocks found or hidden on the trail.

FINDINGS

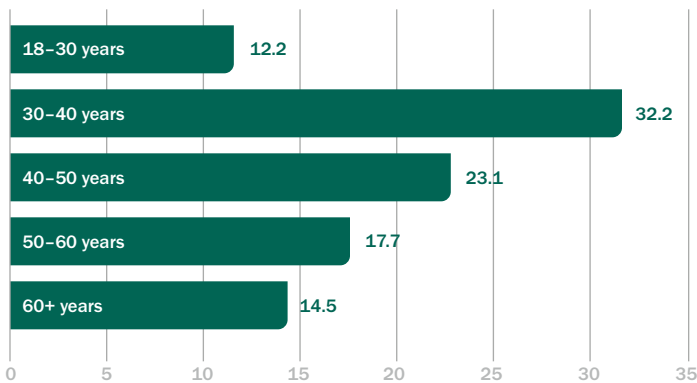
3 Objective #1: To identify how the Nature Trail is currently being used and key users/stakeholders

3.1 Demographic Overview of Survey Respondents:

As part of the data collection strategy, an online community survey and virtual community interviews were conducted to identify key trail users, and how the nature trail is currently being used. Survey questions identified demographic information of trail users.

Age Range: The age ranges of survey respondents are identified in Figure 2. Out of the 163 survey respondents, 12.3% were between the ages of 18-30, 32.3% were between the ages of 30-40, 23.1% were between 40-50, 17.7% were between 50-60, and 14.5% identified as being 60+.

Figure 2: Age distribution of survey respondents by %.



Distance Traveled: To get a sense of the distance individuals travelled to get to the trail, survey respondents were asked to identify their postal codes, as well as briefly describe how they typically travelled to the trail and how long it took them to get to the trail. Postal codes of survey respondents were tallied and mapped. Figure 3 shows the geographic distribution of survey respondents.

Most survey respondents stated that they drove on average 10-30 minutes to get to the trail, while others described being able to walk to the trail. There were a few respondents that stated it would take over an hour drive to get to the trail.

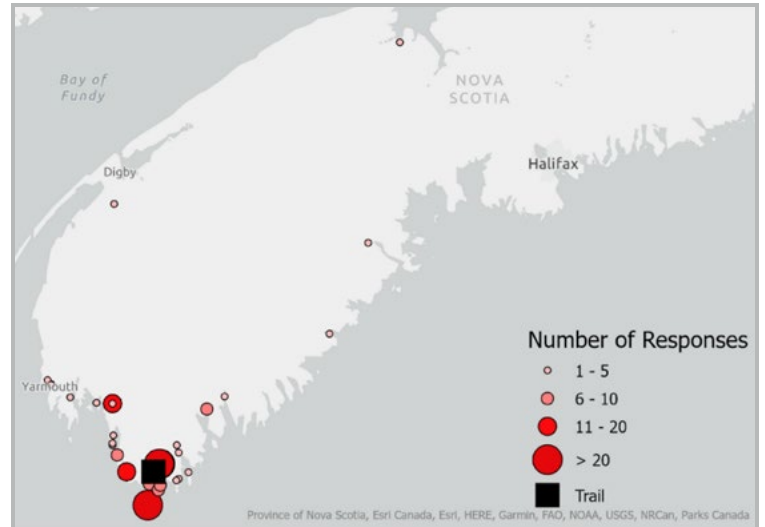


Figure 3: Geographic distribution of survey respondents by response.

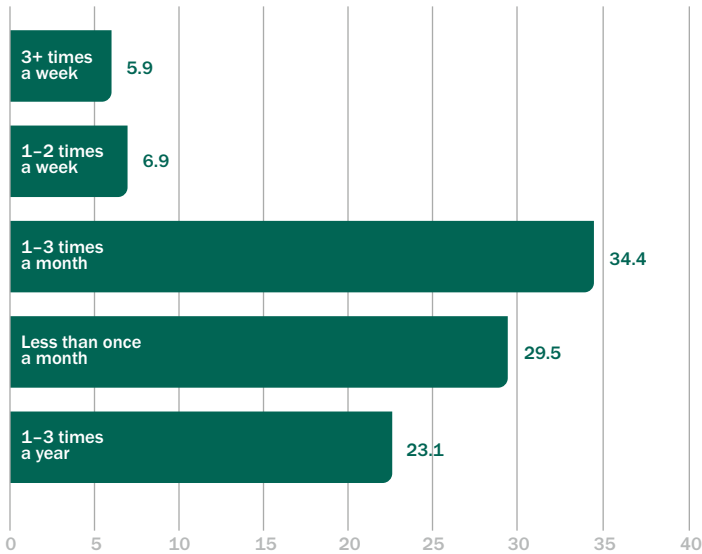
3.2 Overview of Trail Use:

Frequency of Visits: When asked how frequently survey respondents used the trail, the majority, 34.4% stated that they typically visited the trail 1-3 times a month. 29.5% reported using the trail less than once a month, 23.1% reported only using the trail 1-3 times a year. 6.9% reported using the trail 1-2 times a week, where 5.9% reported using it 3+ times a week. Figure 4 displays the frequency in which survey respondents used the trail.

During their visits, the majority, 76.8% of survey respondents stated that they spent on average 30-60 minutes on the trail, 11.2% stated they spent less than 30 minutes on the trail, 10.7% reported spending 1-2 hours on the trail, and 1% reported spending more than 2 hours on the trail each visit.

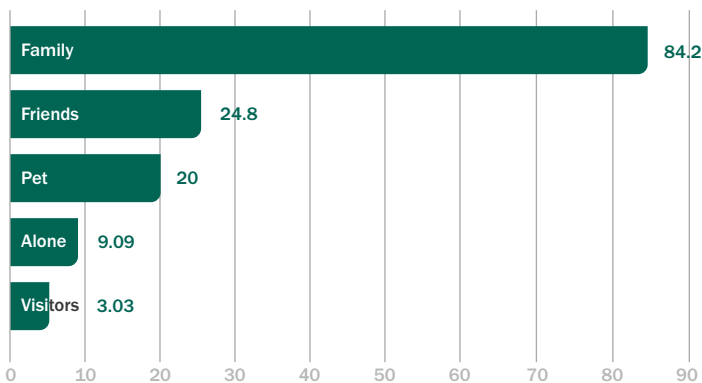
Factors Influencing Visits: When prompted what factors influence their use of the trail, respondents stated that weather and trail conditions were factors in their trail use. Respondents reported using the trail most in the summer and fall, and less when trail conditions were muddy and wet. Events happening on the trail were another factor that influenced survey respondents' trail use. Having events happening on the trail increased users' frequency of visiting the trail. Survey respondents also mentioned that the presence of new rocks, as well as taking children or grandchildren, influenced their frequency of trail visits. Another factor that influenced trail use was a chance to observe wildlife.

Figure 4: Survey respondents' frequency of trail use by %.



When asked who survey respondents typically use the trail with, the majority, 84.2% stated that they use the trail with their family, 24.8% described using the trail with friends, 20% reported they used the trail with their pet, 9.09% reported using the trail alone, and 3.03% stated that they use the trail with visitors from outside of the area when they are visiting. Figure 5 displays the percentages of who survey respondents use the trail with.

Figure 5: Who survey respondents use the trail with by % (listing all that apply).



When asked to list who they use the trail with, many survey respondents reported using the trail with more than one group. For example, using the trail with family, friends and a pet. Responses to open-ended questions within the survey highlighted the intergenerational use of the trail, where some survey respondents stated they visit the trail with children, parents, and grandparents. As well, respondents reported using the trail with individuals of varying ages, and with extended family. Trail users also stated using the trail alone, or as a place to bring visitors when in the area. Note that some respondents used the trail in more than one of the ways named above, such as with family and friends.

These survey responses highlight the use of the trail as being a place to visit alone or with a pet, with visitors, as well as a place to connect with family and friends of different generations:



My children ages 3 and 7 months (in a stroller). Also usually go with friends with children of the same relative toddler age group.

I visit the trail most often with my golden retriever. I have also been there with my mom (who is in her 70s), my friends (50ish), my sister (47), my daughter (22).

Sometimes I go alone when I need a quiet place to think. Sometimes I take visitors there to see the rock collections. Usually, I take some or all of the grandchildren, who range in age from 7 to 12 (five in total).

Children 7, 8 & 11. Me and my partner. Our parents and friends, cousins, aunts, uncles, etc. Everyone enjoys the trail.

Participation in Programs on the Trail: To get a sense of children's participation in programs, survey respondents were asked to indicate the different programs they or their child have participated in. Based on survey responses, the most frequent response was holiday programs (32.3%). Other programs listed included participating in the painted rocks activities (31.4%), group hiking events (7.52%), professional development events (2.65%), and After the Bell (1.77%).



4 Objective #2: To gain a deeper understanding of community members' experiences of the Nature Trail as a natural public space, including their motivations, perceived sense of wellbeing, enjoyment/appreciation of nature, and leisure or play

4.1 Overview of Trail Activities:

To gain an understanding of community member's use of the trail, survey respondents were asked to identify what activities they engage in while on the trail. Respondents were able to choose all the activities that applied to them. Most respondents, 96.4%, stated that they walk or hike on the trail. 86.3% identified looking for painted rocks while on the trail or creating painted rocks for the trail. 45.2% used the trail to look for nature items such as birds, animals, leaves, and rocks, while 36.3% stated that they engaged in photog-

raphy while on the trail. 33.9% reported participating in programs on the trail, and 32.7% stated using the trail for outdoor play or nature play. Finally, 20.8% of survey respondents stated they used the trail to learn about nature and the environment. Figure 6 describes the activities that survey respondents engage in while on the trail.

4.2 Motivations for Visiting the Trail:

Insight into community members' experiences of the trail, including motivations and perceived sense of wellbeing, was explored through the community surveys and semi-structured interviews. To understand the motivations for why community members use the trail, survey respondents were asked to rank their top motivations for using the trail based on eight different options. The options included: increasing physical activity, spending time outdoors/in nature, spending time with family/friends, connecting with community, improving mental wellbeing, learning new outdoor activities and skills, reducing screen time, and decreasing social isolation due to COVID-19 restrictions. Out of these options, the top three motivations that emerged for using the trail included:

- 1) spending time outdoors/in nature;**
 - 2) spending time with family/friends; and**
 - 3) increasing physical activity.**
- Figure 7 displays the top three motivations for visiting the trail.

Figure 6: Activities engaged in while on the trail by % (listing all that apply).

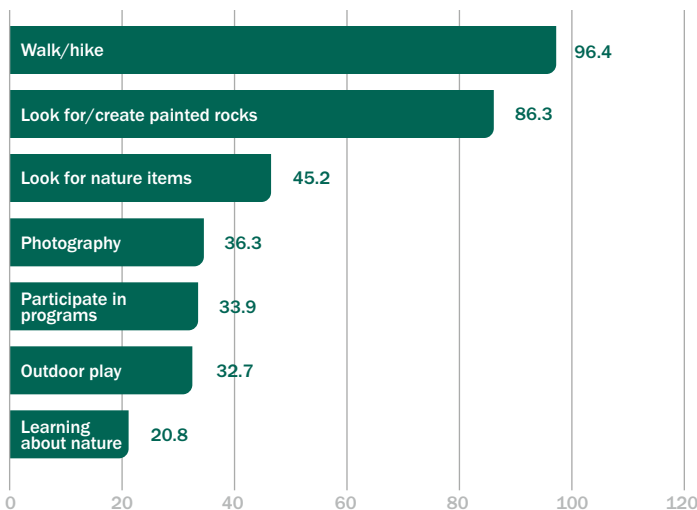


Figure 7: Top three motivations for visiting the trail.

-  Spending time outdoors/in nature
-  Spending time with family/friends
-  Increasing physical activity



The survey respondents also provided more insight into their motivations for visiting the trail by answering open-ended questions. The following responses highlight some of the perceived benefits of visiting the trail, and the opportunities for socialization and intergenerational engagement in activities.



A good stress reliever for everyone, it does the [mind] and body good in the wooded area, it's so peaceful there, it's amazing how you feel after you come out, we just [don't] do it enough.

A fun, outside activity.

Showing my grandson a new adventure.

Socialization and nature.

4.3 Perceived Benefits of Using the Trail:

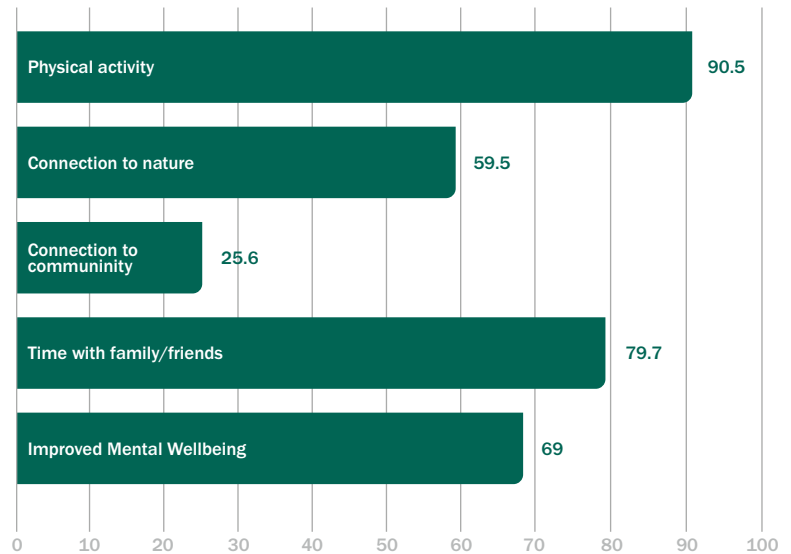
To gain an understanding of benefits that community members receive from using the trail, respondents were asked to choose up to three benefits they received from using the trail. The top benefit that was reported was physical activity, where 90.4% of survey respondents stated receiving this benefit while on the trail. 79.7% reported spending time with family and friends as being a benefit of using the trail, and 69% reported improved mental wellbeing from using the trail. 59.5% reported connection to nature as a benefit of the trail, and 25.6% reported connection to community as being a benefit they received from using the trail. Figure 8 shows the benefits that survey respondents gained from using the trail.

Interviewees were also asked to describe the benefits they received from using the trail. Their responses also highlight the multiple benefits that they felt they received from using the trail, in particular the ability to be in nature, engage in physical activity, express creativity, as well as connect intergenerationally with family.



...it's like a hub...It's a space where people can go and reconnect with nature and just be creative...It's great for families, it's great for all generations...So I guess we could say it's an intergenerational spot where people can reconnect with nature." (Participant G)

Figure 8: Perceived benefits from using the trail by % (selecting top 3).



Community members also highlighted one of the benefits of the trail as being a space that was local and centrally located near the arena and recreation centre, as this provided a nearby space to connect with nature and feel connected to their community.



Well, the benefits would be that it's local, it's close. It's near the arena and the rec department with the playground. It's exercise, of course, being with nature or connecting with nature, just seeing the community talent, that kind of thing." (Participant A)

Many of the interviewees also highlighted one of the benefits of the trail being a space where connection to community and community engagement could occur.



Well, there's exercise for one thing...and you could have a picnic, or just sit there and enjoy ...the ocean. And other benefits are well, it's good it's good to see the rocks. It's good to see community being involved in it right." (Participant F)



4.4 Most Enjoyed Features of the Trail:

To get a sense of what features of the trail, community members liked most, survey respondents were asked to describe what they enjoyed most about the trail. The open text responses were tallied, and a word map was created with the size of the text representing the frequency of the response. Figure 9 displays the word map and what survey respondents like most about the trail.

Figure 9: Word map of most enjoyed features of the trail.





Some of the most common responses included the **painted rocks, the nature and woods on the trail, the quiet and peaceful nature of the trail, as well as the child-friendly aspects of the trail.**

Open text survey responses highlight these elements of the trail that individuals most enjoy.



I like that it is feels more like nature then other walking trails that have been made. And love finding rocks! Watching the kids go into the little off trails made and letting them explore

How it has brought the community together

Enjoy watching my children run through the woods (looking for treasure, rocks, animal tracks, etc) freely exploring

Just being outside looking at the beauty all around us be it nature or the rocks with my family

Quiet, pleasant walk in a well kept path with nature views that vary from woods to ocean.

I love that it's a clean positive environment, everyone you may come across is always happy and smiling.

I appreciate how each time I visit the trail there are new things to see.

I like the great feeling of being connected to nature and enjoying the painted rocks.

The rocks...easy walking...time spent with family



Children have the freedom to explore and discover nature and 'magical worlds' along the trails and wooded areas.



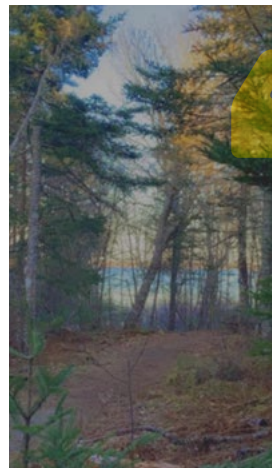
4.5 Photo Challenge: Sharing Experiences on the Trail:

The survey findings were reinforced by the photos, captions, and stories shared from community members through the photo challenge. Many of the photo contest entries focused on participants enjoying the trail and looking at the painted rocks with their children and grandchildren. The participants not how the children they visit the trail with enjoy seeing the different characters on the rocks, participating in scavenger hunts/finding the hidden treasure chest on

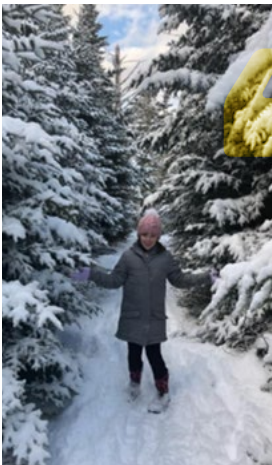
the trail, and painting their own rocks to add to the trail. Participants of the photo challenge also submitted photos and descriptions highlighting the peaceful and natural aspects of the trail. Participants noted they enjoyed being in the woods, being able to see the ocean, as well as enjoying the snow. Below are a few examples from the photo contest entries of participants using the trail in various ways.



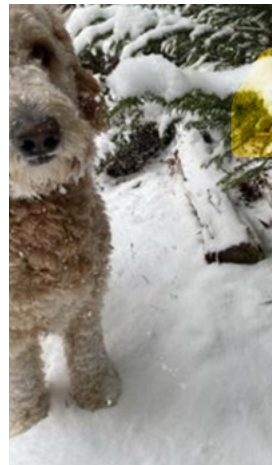
This is our favourite section of the rock trail as it has my boys' favourite characters on the rocks! I also love to walk this way as the view close to this section is of the water! Such a beautiful trail that we have enjoyed many times and cannot wait to get back on it for an adventure!



It was a very peaceful walk, and loved seeing the ocean through the trees.



This photo was taken Jan 2021. This part of the trail was so full of snow that it created an insulation effect. It was just so peaceful in there. It was the most beautiful winter wonderland and my best memory of the trail so far.



Scout loving his snowy walk on the trail. I love when the snow weighs the tree branches down. This was on the nature trail, somewhere in one of the cross trails. I chose this photo as Scout is the cutest lol, he loves the snow and exploring on the trail and smelling everything. Winter is my favourite time, with the snow hanging on the trees, although we also really enjoy going when there is no snow to see all the beautiful rocks.



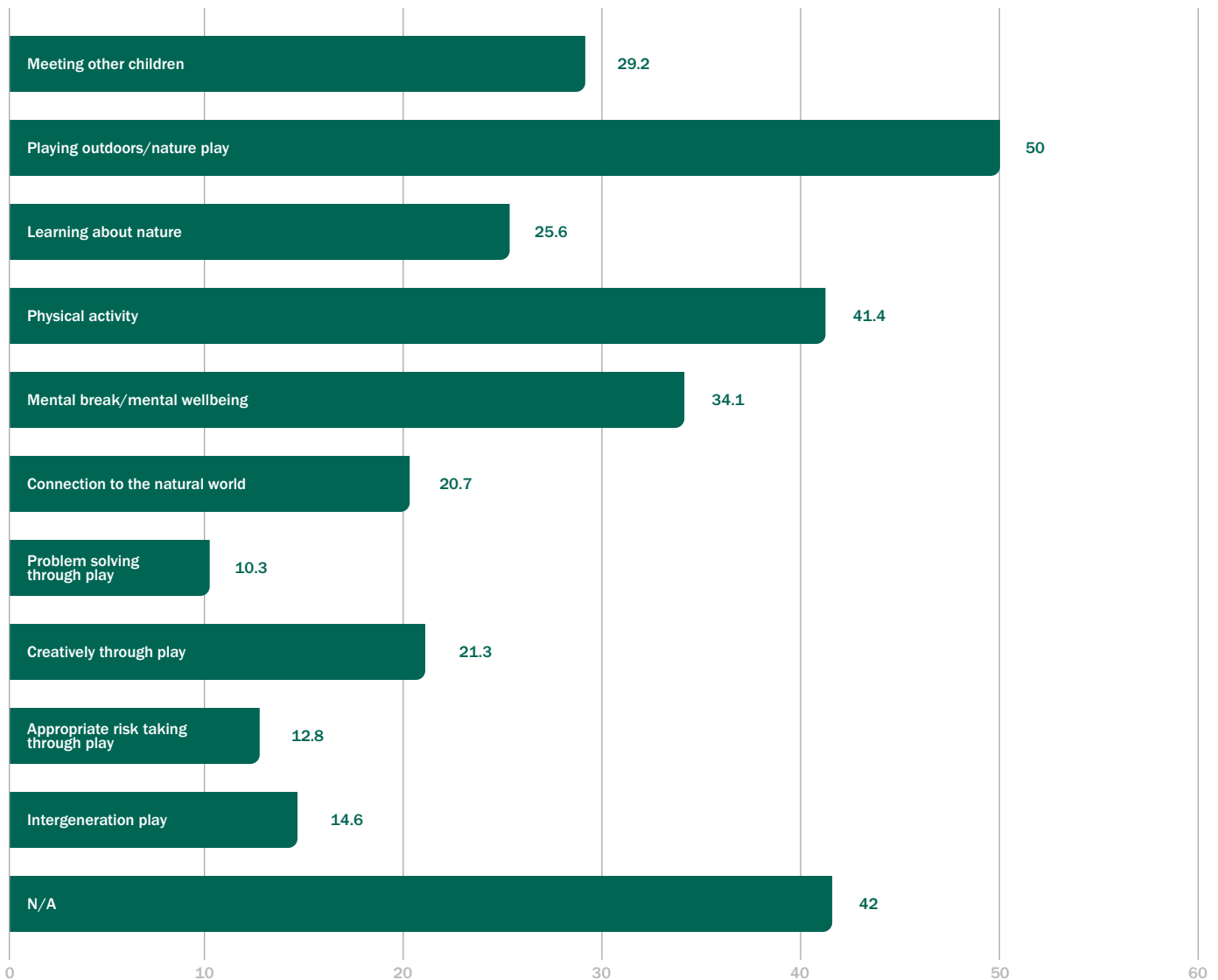
4.6 Children's Experiences on the Trail

4.6.1 PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS ON THE TRAIL:

When asked in the survey what benefits they perceive their child gains from participating in programs, 50% reported playing outdoors/nature play as the top benefit for their children. 41.4% reported physical activity as a benefit their child received from par-

ticipating in programs, and 34.1% stated that mental break/mental wellbeing was a benefit their child received. Figure 10 displays the perceived benefits children receive from participating in programs based on survey responses.

Figure 10: Perceived benefits children receive from participating in programs by % (listing all that apply).





4.6.2 IDENTIFYING IMPORTANT TRAIL FEATURES THROUGH PHOTOSTORIES WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

The walking tours and creation of photostories with young people provided rich and meaningful insight into their experiences on the trail. The time spent on the trail with young people revealed the unique opportunities afforded by the trail to explore movement, individual and social engagement, and interaction with the natural environment.

Below are the main features of the trail that the children photographed along with their personal accounts describing the photograph or element of the trail they most enjoyed. The main features that the children photographed included painted rocks, branches and side paths, mud, as well as the large climbing rocks.

- a. **Painted Rocks:** During their walk on the trail, children were observed to be interested in looking at, touching, and searching for certain rocks. The rocks that seemed to stand out to children were painted in bright colours or included cartoon images, or animals.



I like seeing it. I like the sun and the rainbow. It is my favorite picture. I like the clouds.



Gnomes make the trail fun. I like the pink one because it has a heart on it.



I like seeing the lighthouse. Seeing the lobster, birds, boats

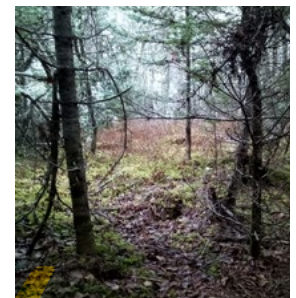


The painted rocks also helped remind children of other experiences they had with nature. One student took a photo of the "ladybug crossing" because it reminded them of a time that they caught real lady bugs with their uncle.

- b. **Branches & Side Paths:** Another feature of the trail that children were observed to enjoy were the branches and small side paths that went off the main trail into the woods. Although some educators reminded students that they were not allowed to play with sticks, some students were observed to make walking sticks out of the branches.



I like playing with the branches.



We like going off-trail, doing shortcuts.



c. **Mud:** The sections of the trail that included mud were a feature of the trail that the children enjoyed and photographed. Children were observed walking and stomping in the muddy sections of the trail and one child stated that they liked to pretend that the mud was quicksand. A few children were also observed to be very engaged with the mud making “mud pies.” When asked what their favourite part of the trail was one child responded, “playing in the mud. I like getting my boots dirty it’s sticky and fun.”



I like stepping in the mud

It (the mud) is squishy. It feels cool on my feet

d. **Large Climbing Rocks:** The large climbing rocks were another feature of the trail that stood out to children. Many children were observed to climb on the rocks and stated that the large rocks were their favourite feature of the trail.



I like to climb the big rock. Fun that it is so big.



I like getting my boots muddy

I lost my boot here earlier (in the mud). Plants and nature are beautiful, it makes me feel nice



I like to climb this rock, so I need a picture for memor(ies).



5 Objective #3: To examine community members' views and recommendations for the future development of the Nature Trail

One of the main objectives for this project was to elicit and examine the community's views of the trail and recommendations for potential future development that they would like to see on the trail. Survey and interview questions asked community members about different barriers they may have experienced using the trail, as well as recommendations for trail development or future programs on the trail.

5.1 Barriers to Accessing the Trail:

The majority of survey respondents, **88.3% reported that they did not experience any barriers to accessing the trail or participating in programs on the trail.** It is important to note that if people encountered barriers to using the trail, they might have been less likely than others to participate in the survey; however, following are key recommendations from the study regarding barriers and accessibility considerations.

5.1.1 ACCESSIBILITY AND MOBILITY CONSIDERATIONS:

Challenges related to Trail Surface: The most common barrier that community members reported was mobility considerations on the trail. Many individuals highlighted accessibility concerns that individuals using strollers, mobility aids, or individuals with mobility issues face when trying to use the trail. Interviews with community members accentuate this barrier of accessibility by describing the difficulty of using the trail with a stroller, young walker, and individuals with mobility issues.



I don't feel like it's accessible to everybody in all abilities, even like when we take our kids there when our youngest was still in a stroller, it was extremely hard to push the stroller down the path before he could walk, and even now if we take him there... he's still not all that stable on his feet. He's definitely going to trip and fall on stuff, it's pretty uneven. And even if you were in a wheelchair or you were elderly, like my mom. She's almost 70, if she was going to come walk the trail with us, with the boys, she would probably have a difficult time. So, I feel like, as far as accessibility on the trail it'd be better if it was groomed or if it had some sort of surface." (Participant D)

Related to accessibility, another barrier for individuals were the muddy sections of the trail. Although a favourite element of the trail for children, some community members highlighted how the muddy sections could be a barrier for some individuals with mobility challenges trying to access the trail.



...there is a certain section ... where it's closer to the ocean, and it gets really mucky and swampy there... it's messy, you know, not easy to walk, [and] maybe kind of dangerous for seniors, I suppose." (Participant A)

Challenges related to Community Awareness of Programs and Events: Other barriers related to trail use were barriers to participation in programs. Some community members mentioned being unaware of events taking place on the trail, or not hearing of events until after they happened. Other community members also stated that the timing of events was a barrier for them to participate.

Challenges related to Location and Pandemic-related Restrictions: Both the distance individuals lived from the trail as well as COVID-19 restrictions were also barriers to accessing the trail. Some survey respondents reported that due to the length of time it took to get to the trail, they were not able to access it frequently. COVID-19 restrictions also hindered some individuals' ability to access the trail, especially when travel restrictions were in place and they were not able to travel to the trail. Ability to travel to the trail was also a barrier mentioned by survey respondents as having to rely on someone else to drive them to the trail in order to be able to access it.



Because the use of the trail heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, a survey question was asked to participants to determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their use of the trail. 77.3% of survey respondents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic did not influence their use of the trail. Of the responses who indicated that the pandemic did influence their use of the trail, most reported using the trail more frequently during the pandemic. Survey responses also indicated that the pandemic influenced their use of the trail due to frequent event cancellations due to changing COVID-19 restrictions. Some survey respondents indicated that they choose not to participate in events and programs happening on the trail due to the pandemic, while others indicated COVID-19 restrictions such as the vaccine passport and travel restrictions as influencing their ability to use the trail and participate in trail events.

5.2 Community Recommendations for Trail Improvements or Future Development:

When asked about what changes they would like to see on the trail, **63.8% of survey respondents reported that there were no changes or improvements that they would like to see on the trail.** Survey respondents and interviewees provided some feedback on changes or improvements they would like to see on the trail. These included improving existing trail elements, new trail developments, as well as programming and events.

5.2.1 IMPROVING THE TRAIL, SIGNS, AND SURFACE:

Some ideas that were suggested for improvements on the trail included:

- **Extending the length** of the trail
- **Improving trail access** to the waterfront/shore area
- **Improving the surface** and muddy sections, to help make the trail more accessible for those with varying mobility considerations
- **Updating signs and including maps** throughout the trail, and particularly at trail intersections
- **Adding nature interpretation** about the features of the trail, such as local flora, fauna, and history of the area



...the signage is all faded out the big top and it's and you've probably seen the map of it it's. It's not easy it's not intuitive... I would have a suggestion... would be to have a map that can be updated... that you can follow with your phone or print off." (Participant E)

"Sometimes it's mucky in places...And it would be good if they could do something about that. Yeah, always fighting the mud on the trails around one section that's really bad." (Participant F)

5.2.2 IMPROVING TRAIL AMENITIES:

Several ideas for future trail development were shared relating to trail maintenance and amenities, including adding the following:

- Rest/sitting areas with benches or hammocks
- Picnic area
- Garbage bins
- Activities and play structure for children
- Fitness area
- Washroom facilities
- Lights for use at night



I don't feel like there was a whole lot of opportunity for people to sit... I don't even know what you would call it, whether a meditation spot, or something... I'm not sure what wording would be good for that, but something to invite you to just sit and ponder." (Participant E)

"...expanded maybe with more trails, more signage. More rocks, of course, themes or whatever maybe down by the ocean part of things. Maybe some picnic tables, or you know I don't know if you need lighting per se but like if they were going to do night events or activities, maybe lighting might be an asset to have in certain areas... Yeah, what kind of wildlife you might see there, and...kind of a bit more interpretive information that would be nice just to have that along the way. Some people are really interested in that sort of thing, especially like birds, trees, flowers, nature, the whole works, you know. Just information about the trail itself when it was established. History of it, you know. That would be kind of interesting for some, I would think." (Participant A)



5.2.3 COMMUNITY IDEAS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMS AND EVENTS:

87.7% of survey respondents indicated that there were no program or event changes they would like to see happening on the trail. However, many ideas were offered by survey respondents and interview participants for future programs or events in addition to current ones, such as holiday events, focusing on:

Nature/Outdoor Recreation:

- Guided hikes/learning about nature tours
- Snowshoeing/skiing
- Orienteering/geocaching
- Adult fitness programs

Targeting Different Groups or Intergenerational Participation:

- Seniors' activities/walking groups
- Baby group walks
- Preschool play
- Outdoor classroom
- Taste the trail event
- Monthly scavenger hunt



they don't even have to be like real formal events, you know that take a lot of planning. But even if it's just something for...the seniors get together on a Wednesday afternoon for lunch at the picnic tables kind of thing or something like that...you could do anything like that just to... get people together.”
(Participant C)

“...the day camp stuff that we're returning and that's a really interest for some of them. As well as... bringing in some someone that can...teach the basics of the plant identification or birds and you know those kind of things.... We also want to host...some hike leader training and start building some capacity for people to also lead some of these activities and programs.”
(Participant H)

“I know that our area is, really good for birdwatching. I've heard this in the past that Shelburne county and Nova Scotia is good for birdwatching...just because of its location and the migration of birds. And so, I don't know if there's a connection that can be made with, you know, birdwatching festival or anything like that.”
(Participant D)

6 Discussion

The purpose of this evaluation study was to generate a deeper understanding of community perspectives of the Sherose Island Nature Trail, in order to help guide future planning in relation to space design and programming. The findings from the various data collection activities, including the community survey, photo challenge, semi-structured interviews, young people's photostories, and targeted observations indicate that the trail has been a particularly popular outdoor community space, especially during the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important to recognize several factors that may have impacted on the findings from this study, including: i) the impact of the pandemic and varying public health restrictions on trail use behaviours, such as stay at home orders and social distancing measures; ii) the time of year, seasons, and weather events during which the data was collected; and iii) the recruitment procedures that largely took place through the Recreation Department's social media and distribution lists. While the link to the anonymous online community survey was publicly available through the department's social media page, those not currently using social media or following the department's online updates may not have been aware of the consultation processes and their views may not be reflected in this report. Additionally, the data collection activities generally engaged community members who currently visit the trail; the views of those who choose not to visit, or experience barriers to accessing the trail, may not be fully reflected in this report.

The response to the community survey is encouraging and reflects the recent popularity of the trail, with 88% of respondents indicating they did not experience any barriers to accessing the trail, and 64% reporting there were no changes they would like to see on the trail. The main **motivators identified for accessing the trail**, included:
i) spending time outdoors/in nature;
ii) spending time with family/friends;
iii) increasing physical activity; and
iv) improving mental wellbeing. These correspond with the perceived benefits reported by respondents, as well as supported by the targeted observations and field visit activities.

Three interconnected themes were identified during data analysis through the process of thematic coding that represent community members' experiences on the trail and the perceived impact of these experiences, including:

- i) A space that promotes intergenerational health and wellbeing;**
- ii) A space to explore outdoor, nature, and risky play; and**
- iii) A space to foster community-building and place-making.**



6.1 A Space that Promotes Health and Wellbeing for all Ages:

The most prominent perceived benefits reported by participants in this study were: i) increasing physical activity (90%); ii) spending time with family and friends (80%); iii) improved mental wellbeing (69%); and iv) connection to nature (60%). These benefits highlight the importance of the provision of nature trails and parks, of all sizes, to support health and wellbeing in communities.

6.1.1 PHYSICAL ACTIVITY:

The benefits derived from increasing physical activity and decreasing sedentary behaviours are firmly established in the literature (World Health Organization, 2020). Emerging research also suggests that pocket parks, such as small parks that usually have limited facilities, have the potential to increase physical activity levels when they are viewed by community members as attractive and safe destinations (Cohen et al., 2014; Liu & Wang, 2021). Therefore, short walking trails with minimal levels of infrastructure, staffing, and programming may support increasing physical activity and meeting daily movement recommendations for individuals across the lifespan.

6.1.2 SOCIAL WELLBEING AND INTERGENERATIONAL ENGAGEMENT:

In addition to the potential benefit for physical health, the trail also supports social participation and engagement, which is an important dimension of wellbeing (Butler et al., 2019). Broadly, social wellbeing is the social dimension of health that refers to an individual's ability to maintain positive, supportive, and meaningful relationships (Waite, 2018). Currently, the trail is largely being used by those visiting with family, followed by with friends, pets, and alone. Therefore, the social interactions afforded by the trail are an important feature of this space for the community. Numerous examples were shared, as well as observed, of engagement on the trail across age groups and intergenerationally, including children and adults visiting the trail together, and grandparents taking their grandchildren to the trail. Additionally, children of all ages were observed playing with one another, particularly through the community recreation events, demonstrating the potential for the trail to support positive social interactions, relationship building, and social learning opportunities.

6.1.3 CONNECTION TO NATURE AND MENTAL WELLBEING:

Research shows that contact with nature is vitally important for wellbeing (Mann et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2022). However, studies highlight that inequalities exist in the provision of and access to quality green space and parks (Jennings et al., 2017; Wen et al.,

2013). Researchers have also found that access to nearby nature is increasingly being recognized as restorative and health promoting spaces, and is an important consideration for community planning and design (see Nordh & Østby, 2013; Truong, et al., 2022). In this study, participants of all ages described their experiences on the trail using words such as happy, fun, excited, peaceful, and calm. Many of these positive emotions were attributed not only to other people and/or activities on the trail, but the natural environment and trail itself. This is consistent with research that continues to examine how time spent in nature, including nearby nature, may result in a sense of connectedness with the natural world, which also enhances psychological wellbeing (Nisbet et al., 2020).

6.2 A Space to Explore Outdoor, Nature, and Risky Play:

Canadian children's physical activity levels and the development of their sense of physical literacy, continues to be a key focus within research, education, and health fields (Tremblay, et al., 2018). Broadly, physical literacy refers to aspects of individual motivation, confidence, and knowledge and how they may contribute towards participation in physical activity (see Cairney et al., 2019; Edwards et al., 2017; Whitehead, 2010). Helping children to develop fundamental movement skills, including running, jumping, dodging, and balancing, at an early age is considered to be pivotal in establishing a sense of physical literacy.

6.2.1 EXPLORING MOVEMENT THROUGHOUT THE TRAIL:

The targeted observations, photostory activities, and walking interviews show that young people explore, practice, and develop a wide range of movement skills on and off the trail. By walking or running along the trail, searching for painted rocks and gnomes, exploring the side trails, navigating and crawling through the forested areas, jumping from rocks and branches, climbing rocks and trees, or running and dodging during games, the trail affords young people (and adults) with numerous opportunities to move in different ways. While fundamental movement skills are often taught through the school curriculum, it is recognized that they may be developed in a variety of ways, including through outdoor active play, such as planned activities as well as free play (Johnstone et al., 2018; Roach & Keats, 2018).

6.2.2 EXPLORING VARIOUS TYPES OF PLAY:

Outdoor play is broadly defined as play that takes place outdoors, and nature play, as play that takes place in a natural environment or involving interaction with natural materials (Lee et al., 2022). Children's experiences on the trail involved manipulating and interacting





in the natural environment and with various natural features, that resulted in appreciation for the natural world in various ways, from enjoying different trees, leaves, and branches, to finding different painted rocks, and being nearby the water. Children were observed playing in groups, as well as in pairs and alone; and the field visits provided opportunities to observe children engaging in free play, outdoor learning, such as with nature scavenger hunts and guided nature walks, as well as in large groups through structured games. Lastly, the features of the trail provided opportunities for nature play and multi-sensory experiences, such as walking through the mud, and playing with the mud, leaves, and branches. After walking the trail, during a debrief with researchers, students stated that exploring side paths and being allowed to go off the main trail was one of their favourite elements of the trail. One student commented, “It’s fun to explore a path. We do not usually do this.”

6.2.3 DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES OF ‘MESSY’ OR ‘RISKY’ PLAY:

Nature play and playing with natural materials may be a messy form of play, which children often describe as fun and exciting, which was the case for many children during the field visits. Although children were observed to be stepping in and playing with mud, some adults were also observed reminding them to avoid touching the mud, or that they were not allowed to touch the mud. One educator reminded students that while they were on a school trip, they were to avoid the mud, but while with their parents they could ask them what they were allowed to do.

The main trail is a figure eight shape with various side paths and deer trails through the woods that children could explore. Based on the educator’s or parent’s comfort with children going off the main trail, some children were told they were not allowed to go off the main trail, while others were encouraged to explore the side trails as long as they could still see their teacher. The children’s own comfort levels also seemed to influence whether they explored the side trails. Some of the children were observed to readily explore, while other remained on the main trail.

These are isolated observations from specific groups that were observed on the trail, and there are many reasons, such as safety considerations and policies, that may guide adult-child interactions on the trail; however, these examples also highlight the importance of reconsidering the opportunities afforded to children while engaging in outdoor play and the role of the adult, educator, program leader, parent/caregiver, etc. in enabling or limiting children’s play. Risky play is defined as “a form of play that is thrilling and exciting, which involves uncertainty, unpredictability, and varying degrees of risk-taking” (Lee et al., 2022, p. 12), and is associated with important developmental outcomes in children (Brussoni et al., 2012; 2015). Research shows that risk taking is an important skill that

may be learned through nature play (Harris, 2015) and that it may help develop skills, such as problem solving and risk assessment (Little, 2017). While it must be balanced with safety considerations, adult guidance, and support (Sandseter & Kennair, 2011), enabling children to engage in risky play may provide opportunities for young people to explore their movement skills, communication and problem-solving skills, and confidence. This was exemplified by one of the photostories and walking interviews, where participants discussed being able to learn how to climb trees and help each other, while on the trail.

The Lounging Tree: “The tree is meant for sitting on. This is my favourite place on the trail because you can jump off the tree.”



6.3 A Space to Foster Community-Building and Place-Making:

Sense of place is a term from cultural geography used to describe “...personal connection with a place, built up over years of residence and involvement in the community” (Ellis, 2005, p. 59). This connection that individuals experience, which is also referred to as place attachment consists of the memories, feelings, beliefs, and meanings that they associate with their environments (Jack, 2008).

This study was conducted during a unique time within the community and on the trail, as it was preceded by the arrival of new staff within the Recreation Department, a global pandemic and subsequent public health restrictions, and new features and programs on the trail, including painted rocks, holiday events, and recreation programs. The findings indicate the impact of these factors on community members’ experiences on the trail, and the potential the trail space has to strengthen a sense of community and sense of place. The Recreation Department staff have initiated new programs to engage the public, including children and adults, in educational and recreation opportunities on the trail. Additionally, the painted rocks, which were initially started by one community member, have served as a catalyst for broader community engagement, not only with the painted rocks, but also planning events, such as Halloween and Easter activities on the trail.

6.3.1 THE PAINTED ROCKS TRAIL:



Being in a little bit of nature, all of the lovely painted rocks gives you the opportunity to slow down & enjoy their beauty.”

The top three activities engaged in on the trail that were identified through the community survey were walk/hike (96%), look for/create painted rocks (86%), and look for nature items (45%). These findings reflect the prominence of the painted rocks for community members and their experiences on the trail. This was echoed in the findings with young people as well, with the majority of their photos taken of the various themed groupings of the painted rocks throughout the trail, as well as the hidden gnomes and treasure chest.

Impact of the Painted Rocks: These findings suggest that the painted rocks have become a key identifying feature of the trail. During the targeted observations and interviews, it was noted that some children and families visited the trail for the first time because of the painted rocks. It is particularly interesting to note that many children commented on the excitement of returning to the trail to see new painted rocks, to continue searching for the new hiding places



of the gnomes, or to see if there are any new ‘hidden treasures.’ The painted rocks provide a novel way to interact with a ‘nature trail’ and one that is evolving or transforming over time. Therefore, in addition to planning programs and events on the trail, the painted rocks have also served to animate the space and experience for both children and adults in varying ways. While some rocks were viewed as fun and playful, there were also many that carried individual meaning, such as writing a positive message, dedicating a rock to others who may be experiencing difficulties or illness, or painting a rock in remembrance of someone. Furthermore, the act of painting and leaving a rock seems to provide a sense of individual connection to the trail, as people are able to leave a part of themselves there.

Key Considerations for Painted Rocks Trails: It is also significant to note that there were not any negative or contrary comments to the painted rocks reported in the data. However, that is not to say they may not exist locally or beyond, especially as they become more common on other trails. Presently, the painted rocks have had a positive impact; however, it may be important to consider future planning and implications as new rocks continue to be added and rocks are visible along the full length of the trail. Decisions to consider include whether or not there are processes in place to determine how rocks are added or removed, how many is an appropriate amount, and where can they be placed on the trail.

Similarly, while there is limited research on the impact of painted rocks, either from a community or environmental perspective, it is important to consider the potential longer-term implications of a painted rocks trail, and in particular, how painted rocks are thought of within natural landscapes. For example, the increasing interest in painted rocks led [Ontario Parks \(2021\)](#) to publish a blog reminding visitors that paints are a plastic coating that impact on the ecosystem. Writing for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in Nova Scotia, [Chandler \(CBC, 2021\)](#) recently reported on the potential negative impact of painted rocks on local ecosystems. Future dialogue and research may be important to make informed decisions for trail planning.



6.3.2 CREATING A COMMUNITY NATURE TRAIL FOR ALL – PLANNING FOR AND WITH DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

Future planning for the trail should continue to engage community members through dialogue and consultation as appropriate and feasible.

Decision-making may be informed by evidenced-based frameworks, as well as key considerations including budget and resources available, and broader strategic planning for parks and recreation. Short and long-term planning may also be informed by the community recommendations identified in this report.

Improving the Trail, Signs, and Surface: Section 5.2.1, highlighted survey suggestions for improving the trail, signs, and surface, including: extending the trail, improving access to the waterfront, improving the trail surface, updating trail signs and maps, and adding nature interpretation. One participant also indicated that they do not know the history of the land on which the trail is located, and in particular, there is a need to learn more about the Indigenous history of the land. This may include reaching out and working with Indigenous partners, and learning about the ways in which other agencies and parks are engaging with advancing reconciliation (see [Parks Canada, 2022](#)).

Improving Trail Amenities: Section 5.2.2. outlined community survey ideas for improving trail amenities, including: rest, sitting, and picnic areas, garbage bins, activities for children, fitness area, and washroom facilities. These recommendations will require prioritization given resources, as well as future resourcing implications, including ongoing maintenance. Future construction must also consider the environmental impact and sustainability for local ecosystems.

Accessibility Considerations: In order to allow the ability for all community members to access the nature trail, consideration of the accessibility of nature trails is needed. Accessibility of trails and outdoor green spaces includes the ability for individuals to easily utilize and access the space, provide maximum autonomy possible for

users, and improving the quality of experiences in the space (Setola et al., 2018). Recommendations for creating accessible trails for all individuals include: “wider trails with firm, level surfaces and defined edges offer safe and easy access to all, including parents with strollers, children, and elderly persons.” (Canadian Heritage Parks Canada, 1994, p. 20). More recommendations for trail accessibility guidelines can be found in the [Design Guidelines for Accessible Outdoor Recreation Facilities](#) document, and the [World Health Organization’s \(WHO, n.d.\) age-friendly resources](#).

Future planning should also consider the diverse perspectives of the community, and where possible, ways to integrate elements for diverse visitors. For example, muddy sections may be exciting for some users to engage in nature play, to see how the trail changes due to weather, and for different sensory experiences; however, for others it is a deterrent or even physical barrier. Therefore, future trail development may consider ways to create trails or sections of the trail for different visitors and types of experience. Additionally, while the majority of respondents reported using the trail with family and friends, and creating seating for picnic areas, trail design could also consider creating quieter areas of the trail that facilitate different ways of enjoying nature.



TOP: Children exploring the sound and feeling of walking through a muddy section of the trail.

BOTTOM: Programming and activities such as scavenger hunts, group games, *Reconnecting with Nature* curriculum, Story Trails, and more build environmental, social, and community connections.





7 Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Is it a trail or is it a playground?

A guiding question at the outset of this evaluation study was to consider whether the Sherose Island Nature Trail is a trail or a playground. While each of these words may bring different images to mind based on previous conceptions, contexts, and experiences, an alternative question may be to consider if they are mutually exclusive. In other words, can the idea and design of this space be an intentionally open-ended trail? Overall, the results of this study indicate that while the majority of community members visit the trail to walk/hike, there are countless opportunities to use, move, and be in the space in many different ways. In particular, the findings from the young people, as well as those who visit the trail with children highlight the potential for the trail and surrounding green space to be a natural park or playground for outdoor, nature, and risky play. Such a space would be intentional in its design and purpose to be accessible, while creating opportunities for people of all ages to reconnect with nature and the natural features of the trail.

One of the recreation staff members interviewed highlighted the use of the trail as a community space and how community members feel a sense of ownership over the trail through the ways in which they have been able to engage with the space. This approach may contribute towards building a stronger sense of community and opportunities for individuals to create a sense of place on the nature trail. These participatory and collaborative approaches will also require ongoing communication and perhaps established processes for shared decision-making.

This study reveals that there is an exciting opportunity for continued community development and partnership building focused on a trail that connects people with community and nature by inviting them to use the space in multiple ways. Perhaps we have seen parallel trends with a renewed focus on intergenerational play, free play, and open-ended or less-structured approaches that invite learners to move and take the space and time to explore and discover within enriched environments (Rudd et al., 2020). This may require space planning that allows the trail, including the side trails, forested areas, and waterfront, to be used in different ways.

Following are key comments and recommendations that stem from this study:

7.1.1 DEVELOP AND SHARE COLLECTIVE VALUES AND A VISION FOR THE TRAIL:

There is potential for taking an innovative approach to reimagining the trail beyond a 'traditional understanding of a nature trail' as a walking trail to consider other ways of reconnecting with nature through play, recreation, and leisure for people of all ages. Developing and sharing collective values and a vision for the trail creates opportunities to raise awareness and advocate for the benefits of physical activity, time spent outdoors, connection to nature, as well as play, nature play, risky play, and intergenerational play. Clearly articulating this vision also facilitates discussions about the intention of the trail and greenspace and how decisions about its features (e.g., trail surface, muddy sections, side trails, fallen branches or trees, climbing trees, rocks, etc.) are made. Making this information available on a website as well as social media may increase public awareness of the trail. This may include:

- a. engaging community to develop and share values and vision for the trail, as well as for programs that may be offered on the trail, such as promoting outdoor recreation, physical activity, outdoor, nature, risky, and intergenerational play, connection to nature, and Indigenous history of the land and land-based learning.
- b. advocating for the child's right to play as enshrined in [Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#); and prioritizing time, space, and freedom for children to play in community recreation spaces and programming.
- c. collaborate with key stakeholders to create opportunities for [public awareness-raising](#) and capacity building to support and implement outdoor, nature, and risky play
- d. develop a departmental or municipal [play policy](#) to demonstrate a commitment to providing structured and unstructured play opportunities for all children in the community.
- e. creating a more detailed website for the trail to share key information about the trail, including logistical information, features of the trail, benefits of outdoor, nature, and risk play, safety and risk assessment information, upcoming events, and an invitation to explore the trail.



7.1.2 CREATE PROGRAMS AND PARTNERSHIPS TO HELP REDUCE BARRIERS AND CONNECT COMMUNITY WITH NATURE:

The current programs have been well-received by community members and resulted in increased trail use. It is recommended that these programs continue and when feasible:

- a. consider the prioritization and feasibility of recommendations made directly by participants, including guided hikes/learning about nature tours, outdoor recreation and fitness activities, and programs that target/specialize in programs for specific groups, such as older adults, families with infants, and early childhood and school groups.
- b. strengthen partnerships with community groups, early childhood, schools for outdoor learning, and Indigenous communities, in particular to develop and expand environmental and sustainability education and land-based education curricula.
- c. provide clear information and guidelines for planning and decision-making, and processes for organizing community events.
- d. conduct ongoing evaluation of programs to assess program effectiveness and participant experiences.
- e. explore research partnerships for ongoing and examination of the development of the trail, and the lived experiences and outcomes of participants.

7.1.3 CREATE AN ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE NATURE TRAIL:

Future trail development should prioritize accessibility and inclusion considerations. In order to create a welcoming space for all community members, it is recommended to:

- a. refer to relevant [accessibility](#) and inclusion guidelines.
- b. conduct an accessibility audit; ensure consideration of physical, social, cultural, and economic factors.
- c. examine the need and feasibility of additional supports for trail use, such as gear and equipment loans, adaptive equipment loans, and facilitated programming for diverse groups.
- d. undertake an outreach strategy to further develop and promote the trail as an inclusive space, and to identify additional physical or social barriers that may exist for community members.
- e. establish and share a framework for addressing safety on the trail, including outdoor play considerations for structured and unstructured play, and programming; implement related [program/experience risk-benefit assessment processes](#).
- f. consider creating new spaces and pathways.

- g. consider the prioritization and feasibility of recommendations made directly by participants, including extending the trail, improving access to the waterfront, improving the trail surface, updating signs and maps, adding cultural and nature interpretation, while balancing the interests of young people as well.

7.1.4 PROVIDE ONGOING SUPPORT AND SEEK NEW RESOURCES FOR TRAIL DEVELOPMENT:

The findings indicate that the trail is highly valued by the community and has the potential to play a role in encouraging spending time outdoors and being physically active. Participants reported several perceived benefits associated with the trail. It is recommended that:

- a. activities, programs, and personnel associated with the trail continue to be supported and expanded.
- b. seek additional funding and resources to create new staff positions to support the identified values and vision for the trail/community recreation programming; in particular, consider the role of play workers/leaders to inspire ongoing creativity and exploration for intergenerational play.
- c. resources and funding be pursued and are allocated to future trail development and ongoing maintenance, so that the trail may be accessed and enjoyed by all.

7.2 Links to Resources:

- [Age-friendly in practice database](#) (World Health Organization, n.d.)
- [Design guidelines for accessible outdoor recreation facilities](#) (Canadian Heritage Parks Canada, 1994).
- [Developing a play policy](#) (Canadian Public Health Association, 2019)
- [Learning outdoors: Benefits/risks](#) (Nature Play South Australia, 2017)
- [Managing risk in play provision: Implementation guide](#) (Play England, 2008)
- [Mapping change: Fostering a culture of reconciliation within Parks Canada](#) (Parks Canada, 2019).
- [Public awareness tool kit](#) (The City of Red Deer, n.d.)
- [Risk-benefit assessment for outdoor play: A Canadian toolkit](#) (Child & Nature Alliance of Canada, 2019)

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