

Upstream Mental Health Promotion – A Three Phase Study of Inclusive Parks Programming



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BACKGROUND

Connecting with nature is important for the quality of life and mental health of all people (Active Alberta Policy, 2011). The Alberta Adaptive Nature Challenge is an adaptive wilderness experience and model disability inclusion intervention with rich anecdotal evidence about mental health benefits.

In order to make the most effective use of nature as part of an upstream mental health promotion strategy, evidence obtained from systematic research studies is crucial (Bowler, Knight & Pullin, 2009; Maller, Townsend, Pryon, Brown, & St. Leger, 2005).

OBJECTIVE

To identify the facilitators, barriers, character and mental health impacts of established adapted nature interventions for adults with disabilities - Alberta Adaptive Nature Challenge, Rocky Mountain Adapted Sports Centre and Push to Open Nature adaptive outdoor experiences.



RESEARCH STRATEGIES & APPROACH

Our study, in progress, employs a mixed method approach in three phases, and includes survey and narrative, ethnographic data collection through interview, observations and video/photo data, as well as a mental health impact assessment tool (National MWIA Collaborative, 2011). Phase I is a pre and post intervention study. Phase II is an in-depth analysis of the intervention experience. Lastly, Phase III is an assessment of mental health impacts of inclusive activities and policies in practice. Our analysis is framed by capabilities and disability justice (Nussbaum, 2006) and empowerment (Freire, 1970) theory.

PARTNERSHIPS

This collaborative, applied research project, supported by a university research institute will engage with government and non-governmental organization partners in all phases of the research process including recruitment of participants and location of research sites. Partners include :

- Alberta Tourism, Parks & Recreation
- Mount Royal University
- Push to Open Nature Society, and
- Rocky Mountain Adapted Sports Centre

BENEFICIARIES/IMPLICATIONS

Knowledge generation about the mental health promotion benefits of nature and wilderness experiences for adults with disabilities is important for our collaborative partners' decision making and program development. Implications of the study will extend to provincial action plans and decisions for parks, adaptive nature programs, health and recreation therapy practice, teaching and training of mental health workers as well as the scholarly literature.



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