



## We are in the recreation business even when we are educating

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When John Falk was doing research in art museums, he told staff to think of visitors as involved in a recreation/leisure experience. The reaction from the then stuffy art museum world was swift and negative. No!--their work was sophisticated and educational. Falk responded to such criticism by coining the term "free-choice learning". His new term was infinitely more acceptable to museum professionals. Similar attitudes are sometimes encountered in park settings, but whatever you want to call it, our visitors come to parks after work, to do certain activities, seeking rewarding psychological and social experiences. Whether serious or frivolous, these visits are largely leisure experiences.

Defining "recreation" and "leisure" based on research findings from psychology and sociology can help in understanding what is and is not happening in the Park District. There are three formal definitions of leisure; 1) free time, 2) activity and 3) state of mind. These ideas underpin much of my interpretations in the white papers prepared for the Park District's 10-year planning process.

*"Leisure or free time"* is often used to refer to the time left over after work and maintenance activities (house and lawn work, childcare) have been completed. We should not be surprised that during certain hours of the day, particularly on weekdays, our facilities are lightly used. Compare the use of the APT system in any reservation during early afternoon and after 5 pm. At 7 pm on a nice evening, there are simply not enough parking spots to accommodate all the walkers/joggers/bicyclists.

A few thoughts to consider:

- Given when preschoolers usually nap, when is a particularly bad time to offer nature center programs for preschoolers?
- Is there a similar scheduling issue for weekend programs for teenagers who sleep 14 hours?
- Why might retired visitors tend to be more visible in the parks in the mornings?
- Is a working parent able to send their child to a park program running from 10 am till 2 pm?
- If someone were to say "No one is using this park" after making a brief visit to a reservation, what is the first question you should ask them?
- Is an activity that can be done in many different locations, at any time during the day, week or month, going to have greater participation rates than activities that have to be scheduled on a specific date, at a specific time, at a specific location?
- If Zoo attendance is down this month compared to the same month last year, is that because the weather was bad, your marketing was weak, or simply because this year there were only eight weekend days in this month while last year during the same month there were ten weekend days?
- If you are offering a program that is comfortable and effective with a group of 15, but 100 people keep showing up, how might you use the definition of leisure as free time to reduce the number of people who show up for the program?

“Activity” is the second formal definition of leisure/recreation. Society teaches us that certain activities are work, others are education and all that either sporty or fun/frivolous stuff is recreation. So, mountain biking is recreation and a program at a nature center or a zoo is education. It is this narrow “activity” definition that keeps many park professionals from viewing their rather serious and important work through a leisure lens. It is easy enough to categorize activities as work or leisure. But, is a paid professional football player participating in recreation? Writing this article would appear to be work to most people—but if I am really enjoying and engaged in writing it—could it be recreation?

This brings us to the third research based definition of leisure as a *state of mind*. This psychological definition tells us that leisure is ANY activity that is freely chosen and intrinsically interesting. And yes, this definition is where John Falk came up with the term “free-choice learning”. “Intrinsic interest” refers to stuff we do for no other reason than it is pleasurable, engaging, enjoyable, informal, and often socially rewarding—we don’t expect to get paid—the rewards come from within us or are social. Leisure can be frivolous or very serious—but it is a time when we can be ourselves, doing things we enjoy and are meaningful. If you want to experience serious leisure, talk with a committed hobbyist (astronomer, barber shop quartet member, birder). Their leisure style is very bookish, very intellectual, very educated—but it is leisure.

Let’s turn the “freely chosen-intrinsically interesting” definition around and describe it in the negative. This really gets at a challenge that parks face attracting and providing for visitors:

- No one has to visit the parks—they choose to visit—the parks have to be initially interesting to the potential visitor.
  - Do people just wake up one morning and suddenly want to be outdoorsy or want to play golf? Will someone disinterested in nature and the outdoors even read a newspaper article about park activities or do an internet search for something that does not interest them? How does an (intrinsic) interest in parks and outdoor activities develop?
- No one has to read that trail-side exhibit sign or go to a program at the zoo or nature center—they choose to visit—the educational information has to already interest them for some reason—their reason--not ours.
  - Watch ten groups of people walk by an exhibit sign on one of our trails. How many even glanced at it--much less broke stride--or stopped for a second or two? What makes for a good (free choice learning) sign, particularly for a Park District where almost everyone is a repeat visitor?
  - Formal school is reading, lectures, labs and tests. If you think we are in the education business, try assigning 20 pages of reading before a nature center program. Visitors to a nature center will look at the exhibits that catch their eye, they will come to programs that are interesting to them, and they will think about whatever they learned—the way they want to think about it. How successful do you think you would be in having your audience back to take a final exam after a zoo educational program?

- Participation in leisure and recreation is often most successful when the activity and settings are comfortable for participants.
  - Being in a leisure state of mind is difficult if visitors have to monitor constantly how they are behaving. Leisure is about doing activities we want to do, that we identify with and about being ourselves. What does this tell us about the number and types of rules and regulations we impose on visitors and how we approach visitor management?
  - Here is a hypothetical situation. There is a crime spree in a community which makes residents quite uncomfortable and fearful. In a normal week, people go to work, to the grocery store, back to their home, and to leisure settings such as parks. Which of these settings can they easily avoid out of safety concerns?

Leisure activities are comfortable, engaging, intriguing, challenging, social, interesting, expressive, etc. Often the term “fun” is used to describe leisure and recreation, but there are many activities that qualify as leisure that provide rewards other than “fun”. Choosing to visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. is clearly a leisure experience, but the visit is not motivated by a desire for “fun”. Understanding leisure and recreation as much more than “fun” opens up new ways to think about everything from rules and regulations for a park, to the design of programs and events. Everything we do does not have to be fun, but if it does not appeal in some way to the intrinsic (and social) interests of our visitors, they may choose not to come.