Overview

Visitors from the nearby neighborhoods and visitors from around the country visit or travel through the regional park every day. They are attracted to its wild nature, its location along the great Mississippi River, and its proximity to urban life. One person may step out their door and go for a walk on a brisk morning, and another may have flown in from Japan, traveled to Itasca State Park and is through-paddling the length of the river over the next six months. For either user, Mississippi Gorge Regional Park must accommodate their experience.

The park makes up a portion of the Grand Rounds Scenic Byway, a 50-mile historic park and parkway system encircling Minneapolis. Moving beyond is local edges, the park is overlaid by the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area and connected to the St. Paul regional park system. Its interconnectivity is part of what makes this park one of the most visited places in Minneapolis. The gorge that was carved by the Mississippi River is a unique place to visit and a place where visitors will surely remember.
Parks and Recreation Trends

As technology, cultural preferences, lifestyles, and economic decisions for both communities and households evolve, recreational preferences and needs likewise continue to change. New forms of recreation are introduced into communities may gain widespread popularity, while more traditional forms of recreation become less popular as residents age or move on to different phases of their lives. Park systems are constantly challenged to keep pace with recreational trends and must maintain flexibility and an ability to adapt to changing facility and programming needs and demands.

In order for the Mississippi Gorge Regional Park to maintain adaptability in the face of evolving recreational trends, it is important to identify and understand some of the primary lifestyle and demographic factors that will drive changes to the parks and recreation system in the future. The following pages include brief discussions outlining those key factors.

Environmental Awareness

People are becoming more aware of the wellness benefits of a healthy natural environment and how our parks and public spaces play an important role in the creation and preservation of healthy ecosystems. As a result, people are demanding more balance between environmental needs and recreational opportunities in our communities. Outdoor recreation, education, and interpretive programs offer ways to build awareness and engender environmental stewardship.

Riverfronts

Some of the most exciting, innovative, and environmentally sustainable design is taking place along the country’s riverfronts and bringing back a vibrant public life to these regenerated waterways. Riverfronts are being restored and developed with wildlife habitat areas, parks, greenways, trails, and performing arts venues. New housing and mixed-use developments are being integrated with quality open spaces and driving real estate values up along what were once neglected waterfronts. Rivers are once again becoming community gathering places and offer exciting, inspiring places in which to live, play, and work.

Water Recreation

Kayaking, canoeing, rowing, and paddle boarding have become more popular in recent years and provide new ways for people to enjoy and interact with lakes, rivers, and streams.
Quality vs/Quantity/Specialized Facilities
The willingness of people to travel or spend money to enjoy high quality recreational experiences is well-established, and people are increasingly willing to choose these higher quality experiences over using lesser facilities closer to home. This preference is driving the demand for and development of specialized recreational facilities such as picnicking and event venues, nature play areas, themed playgrounds, natural surface trails, access to lakes and rivers, ice climbing, and water recreation amenities.

Natural Surface Trails
Trails of all sorts are in high demand. Many people want to be immersed in nature but don’t want to harm it. Natural surface trails provide opportunities for trekking, hiking, snowshoeing, trail running, mountain biking, and fatbiking within nature and are becoming increasingly popular throughout the state and nation. Trails created with no design standard, often show signs of erosion and ecologic degradation. Natural surface trails are specifically designed to shed water and minimize erosion and maintenance. Trail users demand natural surface trails that vary in difficulty, offer adventure and exercise, get them to a desired destination, minimize user conflicts, and allow them to be within our natural environment.

Third Places
Third places are the social surroundings separate from the two usual social environments of home (“first place”) and the workplace (“second place”). They may include coffee shops, cafés, public libraries, and parks, among other places, and they are a growing factor in the choices people make about where to live and work. Neighborhoods and districts with strong third places enjoy enhanced property values and residents living in such areas enjoy a higher quality of life.

Defining Family
The definition of what constitutes a traditional family is changing from what it was a generation ago. This evolution is also changing the ways in which we seek social and recreational experiences outside the home. According to the United States Census Bureau, the number of traditional families (defined as a married couple with children) makes up roughly one quarter of households today, but that percentage is shrinking as households become smaller, older, and more diverse. There are more single-person households than ever before and children are a smaller percentage of the population than ever before. These changes to what constitutes the typical American household will continue to influence the types of facilities, programs, and experiences our parks and recreation systems will be expected to provide.

Active Lifestyles
Growing concerns about public health are causing planners and designers to build places that encourage active living and physical activity. Communities that invest in infrastructure that promotes active lifestyles, including walking and biking, increase their chances of having more active, healthy community members. Regular daily physical activity is key to improving the health and well-being of all community members. Communities that can provide easy-to-access parks, trails, and recreational facilities enable their residents to more easily integrate physical activity into their daily lives.
Aging Actively
The population of persons aged 65 or older is expected to more than double by 2050. This generation is also significantly more active than previous generations, thus communities will need to plan for and provide recreational facilities and programs that meet the needs of this age cohort.

Working Remotely
Technology has allowed people to work from nearly anywhere and has largely freed them from being tied down to an office desk. This freedom of movement offers communities the opportunity to adapt their parks and public spaces and potentially attract new users by providing wireless access and other amenities that might accommodate telecommuters.

Walkable Neighborhoods and Activated Streets
More people express a desire to live, work, or play in walkable, mixed-use districts that are characterized by high levels of activity and a unique, identifiable identity or character. High quality public spaces are an expectation for these types of neighborhoods, a role that parks are well-positioned to fill. Wayfinding and connectivity are also important facets of walkable neighborhoods. Park systems can also play a role in providing these systems and qualities within a community.

Greenways and Trails
Greenways (linear green spaces) and trails represent the number one demand for recreational activity across the country, offering people of all ages and abilities places for walking, running, cycling, and nature-based activities like hiking, birding, and outdoor education. Greenways and trails located along natural amenities, such as lakes and rivers, and those that provide loops, are highly desired.

Growing Diversity
Population growth in the United States is driven primarily by immigration, which results in a cultural richness that is reflected in all areas, including the way we play and spend our leisure time. The games we play are more diverse than ever, with new games, sports, customs and traditions regularly being introduced to America’s parks and recreation centers. Some of the results of this increasing diversity include calls for more community and extended family gathering spaces as well additional flexible field spaces and facilities that can accommodate a wider variety of sports and activities. Parks and recreation planners also need to recognize that a diverse population will also bring a diverse perspective on natural areas that may impact the treatment and management of those resources.

Parks for Pets
The demand for controlled, off-leash dog parks and facilities is increasing and parks systems will need to continue planning to meet that demand. Despite the increased demand for dog-friendly spaces, parks and recreation planners will also need to remain cognizant of differing levels of sensitivity and acceptance of dogs in public spaces and be prepared to address potential social and ecologic challenges that might result from those differing perspectives.
Urban Agriculture and Wild Harvesting
As with increasing interests in active living, the increasing interest in eating healthy, locally-grown food will also continue to impact parks and recreation systems. Community gardens are a response to this interest in eating healthy and are becoming more and more popular. Immigrant populations used to growing their own food and new housing patterns that provide less space for private yards have also contributed to the popularity of community gardens. Park systems can also increase community access to healthy food by hosting farmers markets and by planting fruit and nut bearing trees for harvesting.

Resource Challenges
Parks and recreation systems perpetually struggle with reduced or limited financial resources, oftentimes resulting in deferred maintenance and a backlog of much-needed maintenance projects. Increasingly, parks systems look to public/private partnerships, revenue-generating restaurants and recreation, creative funding, right-sizing, and a renewed focus on quality spaces and programming as a way to meet system needs and continue to fulfill parks and recreation system missions.

The Desire for Cultural Experiences
Cultural tourism is a fast growing form of tourism and potentially offers communities vital economic development opportunities. Parks and recreation systems can play a role in meeting the demand for cultural experiences by providing opportunities for outdoors education and activities, public arts opportunities, historical interpretation, and by providing venues for community events and activities that attract visitors. Parks and recreation facilities are well-positioned to provide the type of multi-dimensional experiences and greater intellectual depth of experience cultural tourists expect.

Addressing Climate Change Impacts on Recreation
In recent years, variable and unpredictable winter weather has had an adverse impact on winter sports like ice skating, hockey, and cross country skiing, which has prompted a reconsideration of the allocation of resources for these types of park uses. Likewise, greater frequency of large summer storm events has caused planners to place a greater emphasis on stormwater design, flood resiliency, and more efficient use of water, energy, and natural resources.

Importance of Place/Memorable Experiences/Iconic Places
Social media and connectivity has led people to choose to spend their time and money on valuable experiences rather than material items. “Is it instragrammable?” is a measure that can be used to test the value or popularity of a place.
4-Season Interest
Minnesota is a four-season state with residents who desire outdoor activity in the cold winter months. Parks and facilities within the gorge should be flexible to accommodate year-round recreation.

Anxious About Safety
Broader awareness of news-worthy happenings, more phone use while driving, and increases in trail use have caused people to be more aware of and concerned about their safety on trails and when crossing roadways. People are interested in safely designed trail connections and crossings.

Outdoor Adventures/Fun Runs
More parks and agencies are hosting movie nights, concerts, fun runs, bike races, or other events to activate parks and partner with fundraising/awareness organizations.

Tournament Athletic Facilities
Rather than pick-up games of soccer and baseball at neighborhood ballfields, people have become more interested in multiple high-quality fields in one place, or tournament level facilities for including soccer, lacrosse, volleyball, baseball, and softball.

Accessible and Inclusive Parks and Facilities
Parks, trails, and play areas need to be designed to meet ADA accessibility requirements to provide equitable access for all community residents. In addition, parks should be designed with all users in mind, young and old, various interest levels, and from all walks of life.
Visitors Demand

Preferred Outdoor Activities

Focus group participants were asked what outdoor activities they prefer. Overall, the most frequently noted activity was walking, followed by picnicking and/or barbequing. The third most preferred activity was playground use. Swimming or going to the lake and spending time with friends or family rounded out the top five preferred activities. Less frequently noted activities included biking, fishing, viewing nature, rest or relaxation and celebrations.

Concept of “Park”

Focus group participants were also asked what came to mind when they heard the word “park.” Several themes emerged. The top theme was nature. Participants noted many natural features that they associated with “parks,” including trees, flowers, lakes, grass, among others. The second most frequently noted theme related to safety and security. Many participants had unsafe associations when they hear the word “park,” while others expressed a more generalized concern and a questioning tone. The third most frequently noted themes, in a tie, were amenities and animals or wildlife. Amenities most frequently noted were playgrounds and picnic areas. Animals and wildlife cited included dogs, deer, geese and ducks.

Regional Park Visitation

Focus group sessions concluded with asking what recommendations participants had to increase regional park visits. Several themes emerged across all groups. The top five major themes were:

- Increase awareness,
- Address safety,
- Enhance capacity of gathering spaces and create an ambassador program (items tied)
- Increase and diversify programming
- Provide more events.

(Source: Metropolitan Council)

Demographics Analysis

As the Twin Cities grows and becomes more culturally diverse, the needs of park users grow and change too. Future park programs and facilities must accommodate a more diverse audience with different needs and desires. The Metropolitan Council published “Regional Park Use Among Select Communities of Color” in 2014. Their survey of Regional Parks System visitors in 2008 showed that use of our regional parks did not represent the overall demographic makeup of the region, specifically for communities of color. To better understand and address disproportionate or inequitable park use, Metropolitan Council staff conducted a qualitative research project to identify barriers to regional park visitation among communities of color. Specifically, the study sought to explore:

- Preferred outdoor recreational activities and desired amenities
- Perceived barriers that prevent use of the system
- Issues or concerns about regional parks
- Recommendations and suggestions to increase and enhance park visits.

Key findings from that report are below:
Neighborhood Characteristics

The neighborhoods that connect directly to the Mississippi Gorge include Cedar Riverside, Seward, Longfellow, Cooper, Howe, Hiawatha, University, and Prospect Park/East River Road. Demographic information reveals a great deal of diversity (ethnic/cultural/language/age, etc.) among nearby residents, suggesting a park planning process that is open and inclusionary, and recommended park programs and facilities that address changing park user needs and desires are important considerations of this plan. More demographic information in the river gorge study area can be seen in the Appendix.

Table 3-1. MetCouncil Forecasts for City of Minneapolis:

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<th>Year</th>
<th>2020</th>
<th>2030</th>
<th>2040</th>
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<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>423,000</td>
<td>439,100</td>
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<td>Households</td>
<td>183,800</td>
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<td>Employment</td>
<td>315,300</td>
<td>332,400</td>
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2016 Population Estimate for Minneapolis-Saint Paul combined: 716,049 (Source: American Community Survey)

2016 Population Estimate for two-mile area surrounding MGRP: 211,731

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2 Mile</th>
<th>2 Mile %</th>
<th>MSP</th>
<th>MSP %</th>
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*Note: This is using ACS Data from 2012-2016*
**Demand**

According to the Metropolitan Council’s use estimates of regional parks, demand for regional parks and trails has continued to grow over the past decade. The Mississippi Gorge Regional Park is unique in that most of its use is trail use. Trails have been an increasingly popular recreation element regionally and nationally, making MGRP a highly desirable park. Additionally, MGRP serves local visitors as a popular vehicle and bicycle commuting route from residential neighborhoods to downtown Minneapolis. Bicycle commuting in the Twin Cities continues to increase in popularity and is expected to grow in coming years.

With additional community facilities at Bohemian Flats in the future, use of MGRP will likely increase dramatically. The potential for large events, such as concerts, festivals, volleyball tournaments, and rowing excursions, will bring large numbers of park users to the Flats, who may then come back to use the trails along the river. The users of adjacent regional parks, such as Minnehaha Falls and Central Mississippi Riverfront Regional Parks, directly impact the usership of MGRP, especially trail users.

Exploring the potential to add winter facilities within the park will increase year-round demand for the park’s amenities.

From the Annual Use Estimate of the Regional Parks System for 2017, a publication of the Metropolitan Council (July 2018):

» An estimated 58.3 million visits were made to the Seven County Regional Park System in 2017 – an increase of 22% from 2016. Most of this growth is attributed to this year’s update of the estimate’s seasonal inputs for fall, winter, and spring visitation, which had not been updated since 2008.

» Overall, 75.5% of visits were to regional parks, park reserves, and special recreation features, while the remaining visits were to regional trails.

» Approximately 55% of all estimated visits occurred within regional parks and trails in the cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul.

» Mississippi Gorge Regional Park was the third most frequently visited park in the Seven County Regional Parks System in 2017, after Minneapolis Chain of Lakes and Como Regional Parks.

» Based on calculations from the 2008 Metropolitan Council Regional Parks and Trails Survey, 55% of all visits to regional parks and trails are “local” visits. A local visit is a visit to a park or trail by a person who lives within the jurisdiction of the park agency that owns or operates that park or trail. Conversely, 45% of all visits to regional parks and trails are “non-local” visits, which demonstrate that the system serves a regional purpose.

» Minneapolis’ Mississippi Gorge Regional Park 2017 Total Visits: 1,189,000

» Saint Paul’s Mississippi Gorge Regional Park 2017 Total Visits: 1,545,300