
BEST PRACTICES FOR PARKS AND OUTDOOR RECREATION PROJECT FINAL REPORT



BEST PRACTICES
FOR PARKS AND OUTDOOR RECREATION

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June, 2007

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BEST PRACTICES FOR PARKS AND OUTDOOR RECREATION PROJECT REPORT

This report summarizes the Best Practices for Parks and Outdoor Recreation project since its inception in late 2005 through June 2007. It includes a summary of the Best Practices Summit, regional workshops and website development and activity.

I. Best Practices Project Genesis and Goals

The project was the result of the 2004 Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCMR) Parks Study and the 2003-2008 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). Together, both of these studies pointed toward the value and importance of better coordination and collaboration across Minnesota's outdoor recreation providers. The Best Management Practices for Parks and Outdoor Recreation grant project addresses these recommendations by engaging public and private outdoor recreation leaders to translate better coordination into concrete advice and on-the-ground action.

The project was funded by the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources. It was co-sponsored by Minnesota Recreation and Park Association, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, University of Minnesota and Metropolitan Council.

LCMR recognized there are many good management practices across outdoor park and recreation providers. The project provided a forum to share and document those practices. LCMR also recognized that there are challenges out there that result in gaps in best practices. The project was an opportunity to identify and share what best practices exist and those that are needed.

One goal of the project was to ensure Minnesota's parks and outdoor recreation areas are managed as efficiently and effectively as possible by engaging public and private outdoor recreation leaders in a manner that leads to better coordination, better skills and an enhanced toolkit for parks and outdoor recreation professionals.

II. Best Practices Summit

The Best Practices for Parks and Outdoor Recreation Summit was held April 4th & 5th, 2006 at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. Over 230 people were involved as participants, speakers, moderators, note-takers, facilitators, registrars and co-collaborators.

A key project sponsor, Representative Kathy Tingelstad, kicked-off the summit by describing the genesis and goals of the project. A series of trends speakers followed, including:

- Phil McNelly, Executive Director of National Association of State Park Directors. Mr. McNelly addressed the challenges, trends and opportunities in outdoor recreation.
- Steven Taff, Associate Professor of Applied Economics, University of MN. Dr. Taff discussed the changing role of government as it impacts how we pay for parks, trails and open spaces.
- Dr. Ingrid Schneider, Director, Tourism Center and Research Associate, University of MN. Dr. Schneider focused on the declining involvement of young parents and kids in outdoor recreation.

Over the next day and a half, participants were given the opportunity to learn from experts and share their experiences and best practices around topics such as:

- Sustaining outdoor recreation facilities for the future
- Park, open space & trail system planning
- Surface & stormwater management
- Innovative financing for operations & maintenance
- Maximizing public values through collaboration with developers
- Effective uses of technology
- Applied research
- Contemporary approaches to natural resource stewardship
- Innovative financing for land acquisition & development

Open space sessions provided participants with the opportunity to identify topics of interest and to discuss those topics with professionals with similar interests. These sessions, together with the rest of the summit, provided participants with valuable information and an enhanced set of tools in which to do their jobs more effectively and efficiently.

Following is a record of the event, but more importantly, it is a source of information to help guide the next steps in the project and beyond. Summit participants were prompted to provide feedback on the summit overall; each session they attended; plus their suggestions and ideas for regional workshops, the Best Practices website and other post-summit initiatives.

OVERALL FEEDBACK ABOUT THE SUMMIT

Participants were asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of the summit commenting on what they found to be most and least valuable, their overall reactions to the summit, the priorities they saw emerging from the summit and how those priorities should move forward. An overwhelming majority (93%) said the summit was definitely worthwhile. Fifty percent said it was a “5” – It was great! Extremely valuable! Forty-three percent said it was a “4” – I am so glad I came! The remaining 7% said it was okay.

Following are some representative comments that touch on the range of comments received:

"The marketing breakout was excellent (great speakers). The change in schedule Wed. afternoon was also great because it created more interaction."

[Most valuable] "Networking with some "new" folks, hearing about what others are doing."

[Most valuable]" Various cultures and age groups we may be missing, design trends, talking/sharing ideas with one another."

"I really enjoyed the discussions about making outdoors recreation important to more people. I enjoyed the discussion about Parks and especially trail planning."

"There was no part of the summit that had no value. This is the best professional meeting I've attended in my 31 year career."

[Most valuable] "That a meeting was dedicated toward trying to provide the 'best' practices available and that they will hopefully affect the whole state."

In response to the questions, "What are the priorities you see emerging out of the summit?" most of the feedback can be summarized by saying people see a need for continued networking, collaboration, information sharing and coordination.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Mid-day on the second day of the summit, participants spent about 30 minutes completing a feedback form that enabled them to provide input on shaping the regional workshops, website and the project overall. In regard to the regional workshops, people were asked:

1. *What topics are best suited for a regional workshop?*
2. *Where do you think the workshops should be held? (Please indicate if a particular topic is best suited to a certain location.)*
3. *Would you consider hosting a workshop?*

In reference to the website (www.bestpracticesmn.org) participants were asked:

4. *What topics are best suited for the website?*
5. *For what topic(s) would you consider submitting a BP?*
6. *In addition to the website, what other types of communication tools would be valuable to you?*

Last, participants were asked about their vision for the project:

7. *What is your vision for this Best Practices for Parks and Outdoor Recreation initiative? What needs to happen to make this initiative stick past June 2007? What do we all need to do to be more successful as a community of park and outdoor recreation providers?*

Following is a summary of the highlights of the feedback.

Regional Workshop Ideas

As one might expect, the ideas for workshop topics and locations were wide-ranging. Some people indicated that each of the 15 topics that served as the basis for roundtable discussions should be expanded into regional workshops. Others' perspectives were narrower and based upon their specific area of interest. Bottom-line is that we received a variety of excellent ideas. Following is a non-prioritized "laundry list" of ideas for workshop topics. The more frequently mentioned workshop topics include:

- Engaging non-traditional communities/diverse populations; and non-users
- New marketing strategies for outdoor recreation (e.g., how-to create marketing strategies; ensuring we send a common marketing message)
- Cross-agency mentoring program (concern about the looming boomer retirements)
- DNR trails manual
- Trail planning & collaboration
- Green park care
- Park and trail design and management (esp. addressing environmentally and fiscally sustainable objectives)
- Educating the public about practices (e.g., prescribed burns)
- Legislative issues; political will; working with political decision-makers
- Health & wellness & parks
- Maintenance practices & BPs
- System planning – for all types of communities (large and small – particular need in smaller communities with limited staff)
- Working with special interest groups
- Surface and stormwater management
- Innovative financing approaches; funding alternatives
- Natural resource management and protection
- Advocacy and volunteer groups
- Connecting with youth and young adults
- Collaboration – across agencies and public and private & at a regional level
- Performance management 101 for entry-level supervisors
- Research and evaluation; research consortium
- Sustaining outdoor recreation facilities; asset management
- Technology
- Trends – what's coming down the pike that could impact us?
- Sustainable waterside development (e.g., water accesses, shore fishing, etc.)
- Strategic planning – what it is, how to do it and why
- Issues important to those outside the metro

In addition to the workshop ideas, numerous participants expressed willingness to host a workshop. In terms of location for the summit, many people praised the Arboretum. However, there were a number of comments stating that it is important to have workshops throughout the

state; that in some ways the summit was a bit metro-centric. We plan to use a two-prong approach in identifying workshops – topic-driven and geography-driven.

Website Ideas

The ideas for the Best Practices website were wide-ranging. Generally speaking, people view the website as a source of best practices, links to other resources and an opportunity to network with others involved in parks and outdoor recreation. Of those that completed the “Where Do We Go From Here?” form, roughly half listed topics for which they would consider submitting a best practice. Many acknowledged the challenge is in getting people to submit best practices and accustomed to using the website on a fairly regular basis.

The website ideas provided by summit participants are too wide-ranging to capture here. Following is a partial “laundry list,” that is, not prioritized at this point, of some of the topics mentioned:

- Map of all existing and planned trails in the state
- List of all contact people for all trail efforts
- Post sample forms – e.g., liability waivers, joint powers agreements, contracts, concession agreements, etc.
- Create a MapQuest for trails
- Clearinghouse for information about projects that are completed each year
- Resources to help educate developers to better conservation design concepts
- Add a how-to on strategic planning to the website
- Data/research/info exchange – post survey instruments, links, do’s and don’ts
- Post policies, procedures, funding aids
- Natural resources – prescribed burning techniques, land owner contact, deer info, invasive species
- O & M templates and standards
- Post an inventory of how/what technology is used by organizations along with a Consumer Reports type evaluation for each application.
- Health resources
- Funding resources
- Any technical topic
- Case studies
- Green product successes
- Fee issues – fee schedules, collection methods, etc.
- Park system and trail system planning models
- Budget practices
- Surface and storm water research and case studies
- Who to contact about park, recreation , and trails in your area

Vision for the Project

People were very forthcoming with their vision for the project. There were many good ideas/suggestions to ensure the success of the 18-month project. Not surprisingly, few people were able to articulate how to make the initiative stick past June 2007.

Of note, one individual set forth a challenge for all of us:

“Open the discussion to further more participation of all stake holders. Get together with everyone across the state. I volunteer for organizations who have never heard of Minnesota Recreation and Park Association!!! Before you can claim to be the voice of outdoor recreation you will need to have greater participation.”

SUMMARY OF THE SUMMIT

Clearly the summit provided plenty of information upon which to shape the regional workshops and website. The challenge was to keep the scope of the project broad, yet target several high-priority topics quickly. The project team worked to build upon the momentum created by the summit by scheduling regional workshops within and outside the metro area and contacting people individually to encourage them to submit their best practices to the website.

Thanks to the participation and commitment of over 230 people, the Best Practices Summit was a resounding success! One key measure of success is the cross-section of professionals from city, county, state and federal agencies, private consultants and educators who shared information, exchanged ideas and networked extensively.

III. Best Practices Regional Workshops

September 20 & 21, 2006: **The Best Practices project co-sponsored the Natural Resources Workshop** at Maplewood Community Center. The keynote speaker, Terry Gips, Alliance for Sustainability, presented to over 90 people on sustainability and the Natural Step Framework – how it can benefit you at home, work and in the community. He shared several practical steps you can take to save money, time and the environment while protecting the health and well-being of you, your children and future generations.

New this year at the Natural Resources Workshop was the **Best Practices Showcase**, where thirty-seven agencies and non-profits showcased a range of best practices benefiting parks and outdoor recreation. Examples include archery as a life sport, geocaching in parks, the new DNR Trails Manual, using technology to map terrestrial invasives, tips and tools for conducting prescribed burns in urban areas; and much more!

October 3, 2006: Twenty-eight people from city, county and state agencies participated in a training session for the **Best Practices Cross-Agency Mentoring Program** at Bunker Park Hills Regional Park in Anoka County. Ed Jones and Erika Tierney, professional trainers with the DNR, led a 2 ½ hour session that provided mentors and mentees with a framework to help guide their professional development and build the mentoring relationship.

This pilot program was a direct result of concern expressed at the Best Practices Summit about the pending “brain drain” resulting from “Boomers” retiring. A mentoring program is just one way to tap into this institutional knowledge and experience while developing future leaders.

October 11 & 12, 2006: **Best Practices Regional Workshop at Itasca State Park.** This 2-day event focused on issues of critical importance to outdoor recreation providers in northern Minnesota. There was an excellent turnout of approximately 90 people, with participants coming from city, county, state and federal agencies; as well as associations, private sector and universities. Among the highlights was the evening fireside roundtable discussion, where best practices, challenges, and opportunities facing park and outdoor recreation professionals across Minnesota were openly shared.

November 14-17, 2006: **MRPA Annual Conference.** The Best Practices project sponsored a keynote address that reached approximately 370 people. A Best Practices working session to discuss the declining involvement of youth and young adults in the great outdoors followed the keynote. The working session engaged participants in discussion to identify solutions to reverse this troubling trend. Speaker: **Ken Finch**, founder and president of Green Hearts, Institute for Nature in Childhood.

February 7 & 8, 2007: **Best Practices Southern MN Regional Workshop at the Owatonna Arts Center.** This 2-day event focused on issues of critical importance to outdoor recreation providers in southern Minnesota. There was excellent representation and participation by approximately 80 city, township, county, state and federal outdoor recreation professionals. Highlights included

humorist Al Batt, energy efficiency and obesity presentations; discussions about how we pay for parks; a trails panel; great food and networking!

April 11 & 12, 2007: Best Practices Regional Workshop at Grand Superior Lodge in Two Harbors. The idea for this workshop was raised at the Itasca workshop as a forum to focus on issues of critical importance to outdoor recreation providers in northeastern Minnesota. Nearly 100 professionals from city, township, county, state and federal outdoor recreation agencies; academia and private consultancies participated in the event. Highlights included:

- Keynote Ken Gilbertson from UMD
- Outdoor recreation trends presentations from: Andy Holak, St. Louis County; Jim Skurla, UMD; and Tim Kelly, DNR
- Environmental Education Best Practices discussion with Amy Rager, U of MN Morris; Dawn Flinn, DNR; Molly Thompson, Sugarloaf Cove; and Steve Robertsen, US Forest Service
- Trails presentations from: Jeff Schoenbauer, Brauer & Associates; Phil Leversedge, DNR; Judy Ness, Superior National Forest; John Green, Superior Hiking Trail Association; Kevin Johnson, DNR; and Jason Peterson, DNR
- Marketing outdoor recreation presentation by Bill Hansen, Sawbill Outfitters
- Closing presentation by Shawn Perich, Northern Wilds Newspaper
- Great networking!

April 19, 2007: Richard Louv, Author of Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder Workshop. The Best Practices project co-sponsored a workshop led by author Richard Louv. Approximately 125 people attended the workshop which focused on the issue of nature-deficit disorder and the factors contributing to the problem and potential solutions that could be implemented at the community level.

IV. Best Practices Website

The Best Practices website – www.bestpracticesmn.org – features over 85 best practices ranging from administration to development to natural resource management to research. Check out the site periodically to see what's new and to add your best practices! Best Practices are innovative, dynamic and practical tools for park and outdoor recreation professionals in Minnesota. ***Thank you to all who have contributed to the website!***

In addition to the 85 (and growing!) best practices on the site, you can find the proceedings from the April summit, Natural Resources Workshop, the regional workshops and the Capstone Event.

V. Best Practices Capstone Event

Courtland Nelson, Parks and Recreation Division of MN DNR welcomed the group of over 140 park and recreation professionals to this 1-day gathering held at Como Park Zoo and Conservatory. The event brought the project full-circle by bringing together a broad cross-section

of outdoor recreation providers to determine how to address three critical issues that have surfaced over the course of the Best Practices project. These issues are:

- ◆ Declining Participation in Outdoor Recreation
- ◆ Health, Wellness & Outdoor Recreation
- ◆ Energy Efficiency & Green Design

The goal of the capstone was to institutionalize best practices around each of these key issues. The following experts were invited to discuss strategies and solutions to challenge us to move these critical issues forward:

Declining Participation in Outdoor Recreation Presentation

Misty Mitchell, Director of Conservation Programs for Wonders of Wildlife, provided an in-depth overview of a unique outreach program designed to get youth and their families engaged in outdoor recreation. WOW, National Outdoor Recreation and Conservation School – is an outdoor education program in which Wonders of Wildlife partners with multiple agencies in an effort to expose urban and suburban youth and families to the outdoors. Participants heard what’s worked, what hasn’t worked, and their targeted approach to marketing the program.

Park and Recreation’s Role in Health and Wellness Presentation

Kathy Spangler, Director of National Partnerships with the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) talked about the vital contributions that park and recreation agencies can make to increase the quality of life, health and livability of the populations they serve.

Energy Efficiency & Green Design Presentation

Mike Pasteris, Executive Director, Forest Preserve District of Will County, IL, shared the Forest Preserve’s state-of-the-art approach to creating an energy-wise park system and the process of how they were able to gain approval and support for designing and building a green administration center. Participants learned about the changes they can make within their system – both large and small – that results in increased energy efficiency and environmentally sound buildings.

Following the presentations, participants were asked to develop a range of actions that MRPA and its partner organizations can pursue during the following 1- 2 years.

John Edman, Director, Explore Minnesota Tourism, capped off the day by explaining the motivation behind Explore Minnesota’s decision to change outreach, web and marketing strategies to sell the great places of Minnesota. He offered Capstone participants ideas to take back to the workplace, to help us adapt to the new and challenging market place in which we all live.

John VonDeLinde, Director of Parks & Recreation, Anoka County provided closing comments and reflected upon what the Best Practices project has meant for many people. John had many interesting points to share regarding the project’s many accomplishments and the people that participated in each event.

To support the SCORP (State-wide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan) process, Television station, TPT MN Channel, teamed up with Minnesota DNR to film the event. In addition to filming the Capstone, TPT conducted “people on the street” interviews which will be woven into the final production. It is expected to air in fall 2007.

Using participant feedback as our barometer, the event was considered a success. Participants said they liked:

“Wide spectrum of speakers and topics. With outdoor recreation and topics that is so wide in best practices – you picked the best to present.”

“Networking with others and open mic time. Gives me and my organization more resources.”

“John Edman – Explore MN, gave look to the future of reaching the youth.”

Prior to this project, there were no other forums for learning and collaboration at a cross-agency level. This project provided park and outdoor recreation professionals with the opportunity to learn from one another, share best practices and lessons learned. Project participants now have an enhanced set of tools in which to do their jobs more effectively and efficiently.

Thank You

We would like to extend a special thank-you to the Project Advisory Board Members: Dorothy Anderson, University of MN; Patricia Arndt, MN DNR; Bill Becker, MN DNR; Jan Ficken, Brooklyn Park Recreation and Parks; John Keprios, Edina Parks and Recreation; Wayne Sames, MN DNR; Michelle Snider, MRPA; Arne Stefferud, Metropolitan Council; John VonDeLinde, Anoka County Parks and Recreation; and Terri Yearwood, MN DNR. We could not have achieved nearly so much in 18 months without your support and ideas.

We would also like to thank the many people that contributed their time, ideas and support to helping design, market and implement the summit and each of the workshops.

And, most importantly, we would like to thank the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources for funding this project and LCMR staff for their support and guidance throughout the project.

*Thank you,
Project staff:
Kathy Schoenbauer, MRPA
Emmett Mullin, DNR*

APPENDIX



The Project in Review....



Working Session at the Summit (Left to Right: Eric Blank, Diane Evans, Bob Lambert)
Photo courtesy of MRPA



Summit Participant Logo Board

Photo courtesy of MRPA

Funding from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources.



Summit Participant Logo Board

Photo courtesy of MRPA



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Best Practices Showcase at Natural Resources Workshop Photo courtesy of MRPA



Best Practices Showcase at Natural Resources Workshop Photo courtesy of MRPA

Funding from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources.



Best Practices Workshop at Itasca State Park, Courtland Nelson Presenting
Photo courtesy of Jeff Schoenbauer, Brauer & Associates, LTD.



Best Practices Workshop at Itasca State Park, Fireside Best Practices Roundtable
Photo courtesy of Jeff Schoenbauer, Brauer & Associates, LTD.

Funding from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources.



Best Practices Workshop in Owatonna Photo courtesy of Jeff Schoenbauer, Brauer & Associates, LTD.



Working Session at Best Practices Workshop in Owatonna
Photo courtesy of Jeff Schoenbauer, Brauer & Associates, LTD.

Funding from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources.



Keynote Speaker Ken Gilbertson at Best Practices Workshop in Two Harbors
Photo courtesy of Jeff Schoenbauer, Brauer & Associates, LTD.



Group Discussion at Best Practices Workshop in Two Harbors
Photo courtesy of Jeff Schoenbauer, Brauer & Associates, LTD.

Funding from the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources.



Emmett Mullin Facilitating Discussion at Best Practices Capstone Event
Photo courtesy of Rolf Hagberg, Minnesota Conservation Corps



John VonDeLinde Sharing Project Highlights at the Best Practices Capstone Event
Photo courtesy of Rolf Hagberg, Minnesota Conservation Corps

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