

The Canadian Research Agenda
Bridging the Gap between Research and Practice
in the Parks and Recreation Field

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The Canadian Research Agenda is a national initiative led by the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association. Launched in 2006, the Agenda seeks to build bridges between research and practitioner communities in order to improve knowledge sharing and to facilitate collaborative research. The central goal of this initiative is to support accurate research and evidence-based decision-making in the parks and recreation field. To this end, the Agenda proposes a series of measures and actions for “bridging the gap”.

A. CANADIAN RESEARCH AGENDA: AN OVERVIEW

The recreation field has evolved beyond service and program delivery to play a central role in areas such as health, social services, and community capacity building. Practitioners are increasingly called on to address complex issues and are held accountable for evidence-based decisions that yield results. The need for access to information and research has never been greater. In fact, a recent CPRA survey found ‘Research and Knowledge Translation’ to be the primary parks and recreation practitioner priority. Despite a need for research, a significant gap between the research community, practitioners, and the general public exists. Research that can guide and inform decision making is not always available; relevant topics may not have been researched and/or the results or recommendations may not be easily accessible to practitioners.

The Canadian Research Agenda (CRA) is a national initiative led by the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA) to bridge the gap between research and practice in Canada. The overall purpose of the Canadian Research Agenda is to:

“Foster, facilitate and shape Leisure Research in Canada by building research capacity, identifying research issues, and facilitating the communication of research findings.”

In 2005, CPRA received funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada for the *Integrated Research and Dissemination Project*. The purpose

of the project was to collect and synthesize existing research, identify research priorities, strategies and challenges, and develop a Canadian Research Agenda.

A National Research Forum, Strategic Planning Session and smaller working group also brought together representatives from the parks and recreation field, the academic community, federal, provincial and municipal governments, national organizations, and, research funding organizations to work on the project. The collaborative efforts of these individuals resulted in the creation of the Canadian Research Agenda.

The Canadian Research Agenda represents a unique partnership that brings together stakeholders from a diversity of regions and sectors including leisure, public health, sport and physical activity, social and health sciences, and others. These partners contribute a collective strength and breadth of expertise in order to advance leisure research, to improve the well-being of Canadians, to improve the delivery of recreation services and products, and to strengthen the recreation field through improved access to information, complimentary and collaborative research, and a network of resources. In this context, the six central CPRA objectives include:

Communicating and sharing the Agenda with stakeholders

It is important to create awareness and understanding amongst those who design, conduct, share, fund, and utilize research across the country.

These stakeholders include organizations and individuals in the recreation field, governmental agencies, the academic and research community, research funding organizations, and organizations with related agendas (public health and wellness for example).

Encouraging dialogue and cooperation between researchers and practitioners

Bridging the gap between ‘what we know’ and ‘what we do’ in Canada is critical for the parks and recreation field. The Agenda strives to foster improved opportunities for collaborative research, access to research findings, and open dialogue between stakeholder communities. This includes but is not limited to: research that is designed to engage practitioners and that involves end-users, the public, and decision makers, user-friendly research tool development, and recognition of shared roles and responsibilities for both practitioners and researchers.

Building research capacity and improving support for leisure research

The Agenda identifies a number of ways to help increase support for all of the vital elements of the system. For example, this includes developing research awards for recognizing community-based collaborative research, advocating for increased funding and recognition for collaborative recreation research, and promoting structural changes in the research system.

Identifying key priority areas and potential topics for parks and recreation research:

Through extensive consultations with stakeholders and partners, 11 Key Priority Areas and Research Topics have been identified. Priority Areas include:

1. Benefits and Outcomes Measurement
2. Children and Youth
3. Community Capacity Building
4. Community Design and Infrastructure
5. Diverse and Changing Populations
6. Environment and Open Space
7. Leadership Development
8. Leisure Behaviour and Meaning
9. Management and Delivery Systems
10. Social Challenges and Interventions
11. Wellness and Active Living

Mobilizing knowledge by disseminating and communicating research findings to practitioners

Both practitioner and research communities possess valuable sources of information that are not often shared. The Agenda facilitates knowledge exchange through improved communications mechanisms. A comprehensive communications strategy is in place and CPRA is working in collaboration with partners to create a central Internet-based portal for accessing parks and recreation resources.

Implementing and sustaining the Canadian Research Agenda

Sustaining the Canadian Research Agenda requires ongoing support from Stakeholder groups and other organizations. This includes sharing the Agenda, exploring partnership opportunities, identifying innovative ways for bringing researchers and practitioners together, and making CRA resources available to stakeholders through communications.

B. CANADIAN RESEARCH AGENDA: COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS

CPRA, in partnership with a range of organizations and individuals is working collaboratively to implement the Canadian Research Agenda. CPRA is well positioned as a leader in the parks and recreation sector and has an ongoing commitment to make “A major contribution to knowledge mobilization and translation in our field”¹. Equally, “Accurate Research” is a CPRA priority identified in the *Vision for Canadian Parks and Recreation, National, Provincial and Territorial Partners*. In the case of the *Vision*, the value of research for Canadians is emphasized, particularly where it serves as a critical element in the development of plans, priorities, and initiatives.

CPRA envisions its role in the Canadian Research Agenda as leader; acting to bring together a diversity of organizations and interests related to recreation and parks, sport and physical activity, health and well-being, and others in order to:

- Advance parks and recreation research;
- Facilitate, support, and advocate the value of collaborative research;

¹ This commitment is articulated in the CPRA *National Policy on Research and the Three-Year (2005-2008) Strategic Plan*.

- Mobilize and translate knowledge for a diversity of audiences;
- Inform the contemporary evidence-based decision-making process;
- Bridge the Gap between ‘what we know’ (theory/research) and ‘what we do’ (practice/service delivery).

In addition to CPRA involvement, over 30 partners from a diversity of regions and sectors are supporting the Agenda. Provincial and territorial parks and recreation associations, municipal, provincial, and federal government departments, academic institutions, community groups, and non-governmental organizations are represented.

This includes the Canadian Association for Leisure Studies, the Lifestyle Information Network, l’Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, and Conseil québécois du loisir, to name but a select few. The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) has also been a significant CRA contributor by providing funding to develop and implement the initiative.

It must be noted that the Canadian Research Agenda represents the first time that so many have collectively identified and taken action to make recreation knowledge mobilization and translation a priority. Agenda partners are committed to the partnership and continue to work together to develop, improve and implement strategies to achieve CRA objectives. The objectives could not be achieved by individual organizations acting alone.

C. STRATEGIES IN ACTION

In order to advance the Agenda, a number of strategies have been or are in the process of being implemented. The following list represents a selection of recent activities and accomplishments:

Task Group

A multi-sector Task Group comprised of academics and practitioners that are representative of the Canadian parks and recreation field has been established. Task Group members were strategically selected on the basis of their experience and expertise in the field. Chaired by Bryan Smale, President of the Canadian Association for Leisure Studies (CALs), the Task Group works collaboratively with CPRA staff to implement, evaluate, and strengthen the Agenda.

The Group met in Ottawa recently and successfully approved a comprehensive communications plan, re-confirmed the three-year strategic plan for implementing the Agenda, and approved the initiation of a collaborative research project.

National Research Forum

A National Research Forum has been organized for 2007. The event will occur as a special pre-conference session (September 26th) at the CPRA National Conference and Trade Show. The focus of the Forum is congruent with the Canadian Research Agenda – bridging the gap between ‘what we know’ and ‘what we do’ in the Canadian parks and recreation field. Distinguished researchers and practitioners will speak to the opportunities and constraints involved in ‘bridging the gap’. Innovative research applications in practice; that is where research has been used to develop or improve recreation programs or services in Canada will also be showcased.

Research Awards

The Agenda is moving forward with the establishment of Research Awards. The first award - the Student Poster Award 2007 - will be presented at the National Research Forum in Ottawa. The award will be given to the student who presents the best poster – one that showcases an innovative link between recreation research and practice. Additional awards are in development and will be awarded at the CPRA National Conference and Trade Show in 2008 to be held in conjunction with the 10th World Leisure Congress in Quebec City.

Resource Development

Under the auspices of the Agenda, a number of resources are being developed and made available. First, the CPRA website is being re-developed so that it can serve as a central portal for accessing recreation resources. Second, a national recreation database is being created. The database will be a searchable directory of researchers, practitioners, funding agencies, current research projects, publications, collaborative research opportunities, and more. And third, a series of fact sheets and brochures are being developed to provide information on the Agenda and the resources available through this initiative. These will be available in both print and electronic versions by fall 2007.

D. AN INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

The Canadian Research Agenda is built on the principle that greater communication and collaborative action is needed to 'bridge the gap' between research and practice in Canada. CPRA and partners invite everyone to contribute to and benefit from the Agenda.

There are a variety of ways in which to get involved with this exciting initiative.

- Community leaders can promote the value and utility of research for evidence-based decision making.
- Governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations can share research results and collaborative research success stories.
- National research organizations and academic institutions can support parks and recreation research by funding projects, supporting field-based education activities, supporting student research and participation in Conferences and community events, and acknowledge publication of research findings in professional publications as academic achievement.
- Finally, researchers and students are invited to share collaborative and applied research findings through professional publications and conference presentations, conduct research on the Key Priorities Areas; and engage in collaborative research.

E. CANADIAN RESEARCH AGENDA: A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PARKS AND RECREATION

It must be emphasized that the true benefit of the Canadian Research Agenda is the translation of knowledge for all Canadians. The Agenda attempts to bridge the gap between '*what we know*' and '*what we do*' so that the benefits can be shared amongst a diversity of stakeholders. This includes a transfer of knowledge between Agenda partners, who wish to use research to inform policy decisions, to improve program and service delivery, to strengthen communities and improve quality of life.

Equally, the Agenda offers benefits for other stakeholders in related fields such as public health who are increasingly looking to other sectors for new ideas and approaches, for

evidence and testimony, and for innovative and collaborative approaches to social challenges. The benefits for the general public include improved access to information, improvements in program and service delivery, and improved support for healthy and active lifestyles.

The anticipated impacts of the Canadian Research Agenda include improved research capacity, that is, greater communication between stakeholders, an increase in funding and interest in collaborative research projects, a greater understanding of the value of leisure research as a significant contributor to knowledge, improved policy, program and service delivery, and improved access to information for all Canadians.

Collectively, the ambition is to contribute a new perspective to the ways in which research is valued, translated, and utilized by the Canadian parks and recreation field.

For more information about the Canadian Research Agenda visit the CPRA website www.cpra.ca or contact the national office: (Tel) 613-523-5315 / (Email) cpra@cpra.ca.