



History of the Parks, Recreation and Culture Sector in Canada and British Columbia

Note: This section is excerpted from a 2007 report by Professional Environmental and Recreation Consultants (PERC) for BCRPA and provides a historical perspective of how the parks, recreation and culture sector has evolved in Canada and B.C.

It is valuable to understand where the sector has come from and the forces that are acting on it now. The evolution of the sector is described in terms of broad ‘eras,’ beginning with the Early Years (pre-1960), and then moving through the Inputs Era (1960s and 70s), to the Outputs Era (1980s to mid-90s), to the Benefits Era (mid-90s to the present), and finally to the Quality of Life Era of the coming decade.

The eras are broad shifts that have occurred in the sector in Canada and B.C. These shifts didn’t occur at the same time in all communities, or even in all provinces and territories. While the eras are couched in specific decades, the Inputs Era didn’t end on December 31, 1979, nor did the Outputs Era begin the next day. Rather, the eras blended with each other, with some communities advancing to new ways of thinking and acting far sooner than others.

1. The Early Years

Many elements of the public and not-for-profit parks, recreation and culture sector in Canada can be traced back well over a century. At that time, recreation occurred in community halls, church basements, and on playing fields and parks. The vast majority of these activities were self-developed by volunteer organizations, sport clubs, the YMCA and YWCA, churches and ethnic organizations. Some public support for recreation was provided to women’s organizations for the first playground programs in the early decades of the 1900s to offset the negative impacts of urban environments upon children. It was an early recognition that recreation was not only a personal benefit, but also a social good.

Later, during the Depression, the federal government created the Dominion-Provincial Training Plan to alleviate unemployment and social issues by training young leaders and carrying out community projects such as trail and park development.

Government roles were largely limited to the parks area at a national, provincial and local level. National and provincial parks were created, and local governments developed largely passive parks and cemeteries, initially leaving sport fields to the volunteer sector. There were limited or no program roles played by municipalities, outside of the provision of a small number of recreation facilities. The local government role was only expanded beyond parks after the end of the Second World War. A number of arenas and a few indoor and outdoor pools were built, and often named “Memorial” to those who had lost their lives during the War.

By the 1950s, the development of more formal approaches to parks, recreation and culture services were witnessed as the post-War birth rate soared. Early leaders, many trained as physical instructors in the Armed Services, began to look at broader approaches to school physical education and community services. There were less than a handful of recreation directors in the province.

BC Milestones of the Early Years

- In 1934, a training program called “Provincial Recreation” (shortened to ProRec) was established under the Dominion-Provincial Plan and continued until 1953. It trained and educated practitioners with an emphasis on physical activity.
- The first B.C. conference on recreation was hosted in Victoria in 1954 by the provincial government to look at the future development of recreation because ProRec had been discontinued the previous year.
- In 1957, when the National Recreation Association (an American organization, now called the National Recreation and Parks Association) held its Pacific region conference in Vancouver, a committee was formed to look at establishing a recreation association in B.C.
- In May 1958, the British Columbia Recreation Association (now the British Columbia Recreation and Parks Association) was formally created at its inaugural conference in Vernon.
- In 1958, the first facility capital grants program was created as a federal/provincial/local government partnership to construct recreation and other community facilities to celebrate the B.C. Centennial of becoming a colony. Funding was limited, but a few facilities were constructed.

2. The Inputs Era – the 1960s and 70s

Building on the developments in the late 1950s, the current systems began to evolve rapidly in the 1960s. As the birth rate continued to soar with the Baby Boom generation, (those born between 1947 and 1966), communities began to build facilities and provide greater program opportunities to meet increased demands. Public departments that had focused primarily on parks were expanded to include recreation services and staff. The early emphasis was on children and youth services and the facilities tended to be single-purpose sport oriented structures. By the late 1960s, recreation services had broadened to be more inclusive of all age groups, genders and conditions.

This also applied to facilities. The 1967 Canadian Centennial brought a major surge of facility construction projects, many of which are now nearing the end of their useful lifespan. While the majority of the Centennial projects were still single-purpose facilities, there were a few complexes that created a broader range of opportunities within the same structure.

The growth of the sector accelerated in the 1970s, with the expansion of staff, services, and indoor and outdoor facilities. A number of communities throughout B.C. initiated their first long range master planning exercises to identify their gaps and priorities for parks, indoor facilities, and service provision. Parks planning began to include the concept of ‘linear parks’ as part of the overall open space system. Trails and bikeways were now seen as integral to recreation experiences and community environments. By the end of the ‘70s, most new indoor community recreation facilities combined a number of spaces within multi-purpose complexes. The diversity of programs was extended and there was growing commitment to the inclusion of persons with a disability, the economically challenged, and other populations whose access to opportunities had previously been limited.

A generation of new leaders, many with university degrees or college diplomas brought new philosophies and skills to the sector and influenced the directions that departments and organizations took. They understood the concept of community development, were committed to meaningful citizen participation in decision making, and believed that

many services are best offered by or through a partnership with the community and its organizations. The 1970s were also a time of philosophical debate across Canada around whether the facilitator/enabler or the direct provider role should be adopted in program planning and provision. Some believed that this was an either/or proposition and that the roles were mutually exclusive. By the end of the decade, most practitioners understood that a balance in approaches was needed.

In March 1978, the Ontario government brought eleven participants together in the Town of Elora for a retreat to examine the future of the recreation movement in that province. The resulting proceedings, *The Elora Prescription*, became a national landmark document for the field. Written as an interpretation of the participants' collective thoughts, the Elora Prescription identified that the recreation and parks sector needed to make some fundamental shifts, and that many current practices had become "bankrupt" in an era of change. These shifts were summarized as eight "From – Towards" constructs, including moving "from provider towards facilitator, enabler, educator". The coming decade would present some new challenges, directions and opportunities.

BC Milestones in the Inputs Era

- In the early to mid-1960s, the University of British Columbia developed the Recreation Education degree program to increase the number of practitioners with a university degree that had more specific professional development in the sector. This program lasted more than two decades.
- The 1967 Canadian Centennial included a large capital program to encourage as many communities across Canada to build and then open facilities during the Centennial Year. It led to an unprecedented scale of recreation facility and park development in BC. New capital grants programs were created in the 1970s, with the source of funds being shifted to lottery proceeds in 1975.
- The Province hired a number of regional consultants to assist smaller communities in particular in developing Recreation Commissions and services.
- The BCRA continued to grow. It added its first publication, the Recreation Reporter in 1963, and its membership grew rapidly during this period from 246 in 1968 to 600 in 1979.
- In 1970, the BCRA added the parks area and formally became the BCRPA. In 1974, Dr. Eric Broom completed and tabled the "Broom Report" in the Legislature. The report called for a stronger and clearer role for the provincial government in leisure services. The Government recognized the important role that recreation played in communities throughout the Province. This led to a shift of the Province toward policy development, leaving program development to communities.
- The BCRPA, Sport BC, the Outdoor Recreation Council, and BC School Sports became recognized by the Province as "umbrella organizations" that could guide and assist with policy and program implementation.
- Professional development opportunities continued to expand with diploma programs in various emphasis areas at Langara, Malaspina and Capilano colleges, BCIT, Cariboo College and Douglas College.
- In 1979, the University of Victoria inaugurated the Leisure Studies degree program which was based on a cooperative education model, in which students dedicated a semester or more to working within a variety of recreation and park agencies.
- In 1978-79, the Province introduced the Festival of Games, which began with the BC Summer Games and grew to include the Winter, Seniors, and Disabled events.

3. The Outputs Era – the 1980s to the mid-’90s

The recession across Canada in the early 1980s was felt in all provinces, including British Columbia. While the federal and provincial levels of government continued to spend through this period, with resulting increases in accumulated deficits, municipalities had no options beyond increasing taxes and other revenues, or reducing expenditures. Constraint became a common word within the vocabulary of local governments, and for the most part, Recreation, Parks and Culture Departments reacted well to the challenges.

The fiscal realities challenged departments to change or eliminate many of the taken-for-granted aspects of their operations and services. Departments and not-for-profit agencies embraced strategic planning and other management tools to help them become more effective and efficient. Expenditure reductions were achieved through parks and buildings maintenance management programs, energy and cost saving initiatives, and more efficient staffing allocation. The need to increase revenues resulted in better marketing, a higher quality of programs, customer service improvements, and the development of more inviting and less utilitarian facility spaces.

As the recession eased after 1982, the improvements that it had partly precipitated remained. Departments across Canada and British Columbia were generally more efficient and had developed a greater capacity to manage change. An emphasis on the fiscal bottom line, however, had led to the elimination of some beneficial services, and in some communities to a focus on a user-pay philosophy by both politicians and practitioners. In the worst examples, several public departments began to focus primarily on the economic bottom line, with revenue production, recovery rates, client retention, and profit margins as the key measures on which to base and justify service provision. During the Outputs Era, a common concern was that many in the parks and recreation sector had “learned the cost of everything and the value of nothing”.

This was most evident in communities that began to focus their services within the four walls of their facilities, rather than on a more balanced approach that included building community partnerships. It was these communities that often ran into the greatest difficulty for three fundamental reasons:

- Justifying and measuring their performance primarily in fiscal terms often led to being judged only in terms of ongoing improvements in fiscal performance - in other words, those who judge you primarily in economic terms will generally expect better results.
- Politicians didn’t see these insular departments as having a relevant role to play in addressing key community issues or in shaping community environments.
- Community organizations and agencies, that were not direct tenants of indoor or outdoor facilities, failed to view the departments as key partners and were reluctant to offer public support.

In 1990, the Recreation and Parks Federation of Ontario embarked on the development of the first “Benefits Catalogue.” The intent of the Benefits Catalogue was to convince political decision makers that recreation, parks and culture services provide significant personal, social, environmental and economic benefits. In testing the information, however, Parks, Facilities and Recreation Ontario (now Recreation and Parks Ontario) found that the politicians understood these broad benefits and roles far better than many of the practitioners they talked to. Therefore, the focus of the first Catalogue, co-published with CPRA in 1992, was shifted to educating practitioners about their roles, approaches and

impacts in communities.

The uncertainty of the early 1990s was reflected in the May 1991 edition of *Recreation Canada* with the theme, "Is There a Future?" The question was a serious one and many in public recreation wondered if their departments were going to survive in the coming decade. The sector was being impacted by the growing federal and provincial deficits, calls for Margaret Thatcher-style privatizations, unsolicited proposals by the private sector, and a general distrust of governments at all levels. Other leading recreation and parks practitioners expressed their concern that the sector had lost its sense of direction and was increasingly becoming more market-driven than community-driven, and that engaging in strategic alliances around key community issues and needs would be vital to the sector's future.

The response of many provincial governments to growing deficits and debts included the elimination of transfer payments to municipalities, a similar elimination of cost-sharing capital grant programs, and the devolution of many other services to the local level. At a time when any level of government was reluctant to increase taxes significantly, there were resulting cuts to services, increased user fees, and delays in capital projects – including renovations needed to stave off deterioration to aging community recreation facilities. Recreation and parks departments and not-for-profit providers of services became more innovative, explored alternative delivery systems and revenue sources, and began to explore a variety of partnerships. The boundaries between public institutions and the private and not-for-profit sectors were further blurred at this time.

In summary, the 1980s and early 1990s were an era when recreation, parks and culture became far more sophisticated and efficient in its operations, embracing strategic planning, marketing, team building and other management systems and skills. In spite of the fiscal challenges, this era also saw the second great wave of recreation facility construction supported by grant funds, with a number of innovative new complexes coming on line.

The fiscal challenges posed during this era, however, did lead some departments to focus on a market/revenue driven focus. These departments saw their role as providers of products – parks, facilities, programs – rather than as a partner in creating personal, family and community benefits. By the early to mid-1990s, the Benefits Movement was challenging departments across Canada to rethink their approach and emphasis, and to become even more open to forming strategic alliances around community issues.

BC Milestones in the Outputs Era

- After the Province reduced operating grant support to provincial organizations in the mid-'80s, BCRPA created the BC Recreation and Parks Foundation in 1986 to raise funds to ensure the long-term viability of the Association.
- As part of overall government restraint, the Regional Recreation Consultant positions were eliminated by the Province in 1986.
- While cutbacks were occurring in many areas of the provincial government, lottery revenues continued to climb. A portion of these funds were designated for municipal recreation, sport and cultural facility projects. The Province contributed up to one-third of the total capital cost, with the other two-thirds coming from municipal governments and community partners. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a major expansion of recreation facilities through "Go BC" and then "BC 21."
- College programs continued to be introduced, but tended to be in niche markets such as ecotourism and outdoor leadership.

- The BCRPA played a stronger policy and advocacy role, and also increased its professional development programs, and in the mid-'80s, the association's membership reached 1,000 for the first time.

4. The Benefits Era – mid-1990s to the present

The impact of the 1992 Benefits Catalogue was subtle. Departments began to increasingly use the evidence-based benefits in communications to politicians, and placed benefits statement in leisure guides aimed at the public. The 1997 Benefits Catalogue had a greater impact. It was organized into eight key outcome messages supported by a total of 44 benefit statements, each backed by solid evidence. The eight outcome messages are outlined below:

1. Recreation and active living are essential to personal health – a key determinant of health status
2. Recreation is a key to balanced human development – helping Canadians reach their potential
3. Recreation and parks are essential to Quality of Life
4. Recreation reduces self-destructive and anti-social behavior
5. Recreation and parks build strong families and healthy communities
6. Pay now or pay later! Recreation reduces health care, social service and police/justice costs
7. Recreation and parks are significant economic generators in your community
8. Parks, open space and natural areas are essential to ecological survival

The eight key messages helped the sector to broaden its view its role and the impacts it could have on individuals, families and communities. The benefit messages were increasingly used as a planning, rather than just as a communications tool. The eight message areas began to form the “core philosophy” of the recreation and parks sector and were more commonly integrated within strategic plans and documents of municipal departments.

The BCRPA vision and its strategic plan are also based on benefits and outcomes.

While all practitioners and departments have not embraced this direction, there are clearly observable shifts which demonstrate that a benefits-based approach has been accelerating over the last decade.

- The recreation and parks sector sees health as part of its mandate and has initiated active living strategies such as the Active Communities Initiative.
- The sector has become more sensitive in managing urban forests, in reducing energy and water uses, protecting natural habitats, and engaging in recycling.
- It has created more partnerships around working with at-risk youth, including alliances with the police, justice and social services.
- It is also more inclusive of children and families living in poverty and in working with diverse cultures.
- There are stronger internal partnerships with planning and engineering departments in creating active transportation systems, resulting in both health and environmental benefits.
- The sector is more proactively reaching out to other sectors to look for collaborative approaches and strategies.

The next shift in the Benefits approach will be to use the benefits in strategic planning

processes that are based on identifying clear outcomes, or desired end states, and then working toward them.

BC Milestones in the Benefits Era

- The BC 21 capital grants program was dropped in 1995 with a considerable amount of the lottery funding being diverted to deal with rising healthcare costs. The Federal government later developed the Federal-Provincial Infrastructure program(s), but these funds were more difficult to access for recreation and community facility projects.
- In 1998, Vancouver/Whistler was selected by the Canadian Olympic Association as the Canadian city for the bid for the 2010 Winter Olympics and Paralympics. The Games were awarded to Vancouver/Whistler in July 2003.
- The World Health Organization makes physical activity as the theme for the 2002 World Health Day. The BCRPA plays a key role in its launch and the ongoing hosting of the event.
- The 2003 BCRPA Strategic Plan has led to a more results-oriented organization and approach.
- The ActNow BC program was formally announced in 2005 with physical activity as one of four key components. The BCRPA develops and manages the Active Communities Initiative which was launched in September 2005.
- BCRPA is a member of and chairs the BC Healthy Living Alliance and contributed to the development of the *Winning Legacy*. The parks and recreation sector is seen as a key contributor to health and healthy lifestyle choices, and is recognized for its strong connections to the community level and its use of the community development approach.

5. The Quality of Life Era – The Coming Decade

The 1992 and 1997 Benefits Catalogues have had a subtle but profound affect. They have helped the sector become more outcomes focused and broaden its mandate from the delivery of traditional services to the creation of individual and community benefits.

In the 1990s the Benefits Movement largely focused on using the evidence of the benefits of recreation and parks as advocacy and communication tools – aimed at municipal councils, other institutions and citizens. The shift now is toward using the Benefits approach as a key planning and evaluation tool.

This approach is already evident in the 2003 BCRPA Strategic Plan and in the use of logic models by provincial ministries and a number of municipalities. In these cases, the planning processes start by identifying the key desired outcomes, then the actions and strategies are geared to achieving them, and the performance measures that will show actual change.

Driving the outcomes focus is an emerging framework for a sustainable and high quality of life for B.C. residents.

This shift comes at an important time because political decision makers are increasingly demanding that their departments measure and demonstrate their impact on the community. As governments grappled with restraint, there was a greater focus on demonstrating that plans and resources actually led to the results they purported to create. Whatever the future state of the economy becomes, the need to ensure that public expenditures are actually producing the desired outcomes remains.

Evolution of Canada's Parks, Recreation and Culture Sector

| <u>Era</u> | <u>Time Frame</u> | <u>Characteristics</u> |
|---------------------|----------------------------|---|
| The Early Years | Early 1900s to 50s | Growing public support for recreation and parks |
| Inputs Era | 1960s and 70s | New infrastructure and programs |
| Outputs Era | 1980s to mid 90s | Users, efficiencies, management |
| Benefits Era | mid 90s to present | Benefits messages, a broadened role, partners |
| Quality of Life Era | Present to 2016 and beyond | Benefit-based outcomes, public goods, integrated approaches |