



**Research, Education,
and Development
for Health, Recreation,
and Land Agencies**

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TREND WATCH

Articles for Today

The Path to Sustainability – Parks & Recreation as a Key Player

Parks and recreation professionals today have a new opportunity to effect positive change in their communities when it comes to sustainability initiatives. Navigating climate science terminology can be confusing – sustainability, global warming, carbon sequestration, triple bottom line, eco-cities, climate action, carbon neutral, etc. How can you, as a progressive parks and recreation leader help your department and community focus its sustainability efforts?

One of the early architects of the climate change movement was Dartmouth College professor Donella Meadows, a pioneering scientist, environmental champion and author. In 1972, Dana, as she was known in local circles, wrote *The Limits to Growth* (Universe Books), which sparked international debate about the Earth's capacity to sustain its growing population. Before it was fashionable, Dana and her colleagues brought to light the science behind climate change, and aptly stated, "The environment is a necessity, not a luxury." Dana's research and writing changed how many citizens viewed their role in their communities – from passive observers to change agents in creating healthier living environments.

Fortunately for today's parks and recreation leaders, model sustainability and climate action plans are readily accessible on the internet, and best practices developed over the past decade have resulted in measureable economic, environmental and social benefits. Communities are taking steps to reduce their carbon footprint and become more livable by focusing change efforts on open space, food systems, air and water quality, energy consumption, public health, economic vitality, green buildings and active transportation, and realizing significant benefits.



It's no surprise that parks recreation professionals are seen as key leaders in helping communities achieve sustainability goals. In fact, we should help drive community efforts because our services touch all aspects of sustainability – environmental, economic, and social. Here's a look at some of the progressive initiatives in parks and recreation by industry leaders.

In Portland, Oregon, City officials have made community sustainability a priority with a commitment to *"clean air and water, livable neighborhoods, parks and open spaces for all, economic development that is sustainable for our environment, and transportation that makes sense...."* This translates into a park and recreation staff "Green Team" that promotes initiatives in four areas: recycling, carbon footprint reduction, designing green and protecting the natural environment. Initiatives include park and facility recycling, construction demolition material reuse, organic material composting and invasive species control.

City officials in Baltimore, Maryland have an interactive Sustainability Plan which allows online public comment, with a "Greening" chapter that aims to double Baltimore's tree canopy by 2037; establish Baltimore as a leader in sustainable, local food systems; provide safe, well-maintained public recreational space within ¼ mile of residents; and protect Baltimore's ecology and bio-diversity.



Keene, NH residents assist in building a community garden. Image courtesy of the City of Keene.

Keene businesses can join a program called “Bicycle Benefits” – available in 18 states and growing – that provides discounts on food, gear and services for bicyclists. At this writing, Keene is the only City in New Hampshire using Bicycle Benefits, and bicyclists in a dozen Vermont towns can participate.

In California, the Sacramento Department of Parks and Recreation was the first of its City departments to develop an individual Sustainability Plan. Focus areas include public health & nutrition (community gardens in parks, locally grown and organic foods available at DPR facilities, "edible landscape" demonstration gardens); public involvement & personal responsibility (require all users of parks facilities and community centers to comply with sustainable practices); and parks, open space & habitat conservation (increase the ratio of parks and open space area to City population, particularly in underserved neighborhoods).

Keene, New Hampshire has a comprehensive Climate Change Action Plan, detailing municipal, residential and commercial recommendations, with calculated savings in both CO₂ and dollars. Good examples are energy audits on City buildings (CO₂ Savings: 226 tons, Annual Financial Savings: \$39,317) and expanding trees and shrubs (CO₂ Savings: 6 tons). For residents, simple steps include suggestions to drive less, build green and buy local food.



Portland, OR encourages residents to compost biodegradable waste. Image provided by the City of Portland.

An interesting twist on parks and recreation leadership has taken place in Decatur, Georgia. By adopting “Healthy Decatur: A Holistic Approach to Sustainability,” the City has a designated Active Living Director, who oversees active transportation projects and traditional recreation functions, and a Children and Youth Services Director that handles youth programming.

There are resources available to you if your Town or City is thinking about joining the movement to reduce its carbon footprint and create a healthier, more livable community. Among the best resources is the International Council for Local Environment Initiatives – Cities for Sustainability (ICLEI), with over 1,200 local government members from 70 countries. ICLEI USA provides webinars, success stories and trainings. The collective wisdom is outstanding, with 600 communities in the United States participating.

Other resources include the International City Managers Association’s Center for Sustainable Communities – a 2010 survey showed communities adding bike lanes, farmers’ markets and supporting tree installation plans. In addition, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) recently adopted an Environmental Stewardship Ethics Policy with simple actions departments can take to promote sustainable landscapes, foster the next generation of stewards, and provide leadership for sustainable communities. So start the ball rolling in your community by taking action to reduce your own carbon footprint - hop on your bicycle and go buy some veggies at your local farmers’ market – “Going Green” has never been easier.

Whether your agency is creating a stand-alone parks and recreation sustainability plan or is incorporating elements into your community's comprehensive plan, here are some basic planning steps to follow:

1. **Get Started** - Shore up commitment of policy-makers, convene staff and community and assemble resources to start your sustainability planning (e.g., staff resources and funds for outside consultants, if necessary).
2. **Assess** - Create a baseline of where you are today so you can measure progress in the future.
3. **Develop Shared Vision** - Be team players. Engage community staff and stakeholders in creating shared values and vision to create a strong foundation for the plan.
4. **Focus your Efforts** - Identify areas where parks and recreation can make the biggest impact. Other agencies have developed sustainability goals for energy efficiency, water conservation, open space conservation, alternative transportation and trails, green buildings and recycling.
5. **Make a Plan** - Roll up your sleeves. Create work teams to get into the details. Identify and adopt policies, goals, action steps and performance measures/indicators (but make sure to know your community baseline first). Don't forget to tap into existing resources. Work to create a consistent policy framework for sustainability by integrating plans (e.g., Park and Recreation Plan, Comprehensive Plan, etc.).
6. **Take Action** - Implement sustainability initiatives in your strategic plan. Start with "low hanging fruit" projects that are realistic and attainable. Tackle more challenging goals and projects as you gain momentum and public support.
7. **Monitor & Communicate Progress** - Measure the results and continue to educate and engage the community. Prioritize programs and initiatives. Celebrate your successes!
8. **Refine and Update your Plan** - Expand successful pilot programs. Create new initiatives to target areas to improve. Keep focused on your vision and engage your community!

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