

## A man in a light blue polo shirt is standing and gesturing towards a large projection screen. The screen displays a word cloud with the words 'NATURAL' and 'DISASTERS' in large, bold, blue letters. Other words in various colors and sizes are scattered around, including 'HEALTH', 'MOVEMENT', 'WATER', 'DRO', 'BLIZZARDS', 'TECTONIC', 'VIOLENT', 'EARTHQUAKES', 'WAVES', 'FIRE', 'ICANIG', 'TATING', 'RELIABILITY', 'IMPACT', 'WALL', 'ARLASS', 'TOY', 'NE', 'AF', 'ON', 'HAARS', 'RAY', 'WATER', 'DRO', 'BLIZZARDS', 'TECTONIC', 'VIOLENT', 'EARTHQUAKES', 'WAVES', 'FIRE', 'ICANIG', 'TATING', 'RELIABILITY', 'IMPACT', 'WALL', 'ARLASS', 'TOY', 'NE', 'AF', 'ON', 'HAARS', 'RAY'. In the foreground, the backs of several audience members' heads are visible as they sit at a table, looking towards the presentation. A red circular logo with the text '#O' is in the top right corner.

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# Executive Summary

A think tank, also sometimes called a think factory, brain trust, group of experts, or workshop, is a gathering of people organized to solve complex problems and/or predict and plan future developments. A think tank can be a formal policy institute/organization, or a one-time gathering of people focusing on a particular topic. According to Wikipedia, the current use of think tanks began in the 1950's but examples can be found long before. For instance, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace was founded in 1910 as a group of experts convened to address how international war could be abolished. Numerous other formal and topical think tanks can be identified around the world.

GP RED has hosted three think tank workshops in the past eight years (2008, 2012, and 2014). The themes addressed have been, respectively: *Contemporary Management Issues*, *Building Healthy Communities*, and *Innovations in Leadership and Planning*. A fourth GP RED Think Tank is scheduled for November, 2016, with the theme of *Green Places, Healthy Communities: Innovations & Solutions*.

Related national and state associations serve parks, recreation, land management, and public health disciplines. Each professional niche has developed its own approach and methodologies. As associations and universities have scaled back on services, larger gaps are emerging in professional knowledge and competencies. At the same time, new and innovative methodologies, technologies, and practices are evolving. GP RED targets fostering exchange and facilitating consensus on standardizing and identifying promising practices at all levels. With this approach, professionals can move forward with advocacy and support from funders, decision makers, and the public directly and indirectly served – to fill the gaps.

Through GP RED's involvement with these non-profit trade associations, colleagues in the academic realm, and practitioners in a variety of fields, a variety of gaps became apparent in the sharing of practices and standardization of language. These gaps could be mitigated through transdisciplinary planning, management, and agency leadership related to the integration of public parks and recreation, open space and trails, public health, transportation, universities, and professional planning practices.

The GP RED Think Tanks have been designed to identify and invite up to 100 of the best minds to participate in a **facilitated forum** to foster knowledge growth, networking, and improve professional competencies. These forums have aimed to enable agencies and professionals at the local, state, academic, and federal levels to promote exchange through their related associations. Many of the current practices within disciplines are addressing the same issues, but using different terminology and processes to reach their goals.

The focus of this Research Brief is to summarize the discussion that occurred at the 2014 Think Tank held in Estes Park, Colorado. Professionals in the fields of parks, recreation, conservation, trails, land management, public health, tourism, active transportation, and related associations were invited to the forum. Participants completed an application about why they wanted to attend and what they believed were the most important issues facing their field. The Think Tank was intended to provide both professional and individual development for individuals who wished to make a commitment to social change and personal growth.



# Innovations in Leadership and Planning

## Think Tank Session Summaries

The theme of Think Tank #3 in 2014 was INNOVATIONS IN LEADERSHIP AND PLANNING. General topics covered were:

- Scarcity in capital and operational funding for assets management and programs.
- Changes in technology and research.
- Need to position agencies or universities beyond just program and/or land management focuses areas to those related to tourism, health, social equity, alternative transportation, and/or environmental benefits.
- Agency preparedness for disaster and recovery.
- Encouragement to justify appropriate cost recovery, resource allocation, and/or self-sufficiency in budget hearings at any level.
- Strong need to “speak the same language” across disciplines and professional sectors.
- Personal Rejuvenation – We can’t lead or make change if we personally are not THRIVING.

The specific topics were selected by a planning committee who also used the feedback from the previous Think Tanks. The sessions were designed to provide information from nationally recognized content experts and to enable participants to share their experiences with one another.

The first session focused on **New Practices in Management and Trans-disciplinary Research**. It was presented by:

- *Bob Ratcliffe, Chief, Conservation and Outdoor Programs, National Park Service*
- *Teresa Penbrooke, PhD Student, NCSU; CEO, GreenPlay, LLC; Researcher, GP RED*
- *Travis Smith, Research Manager, National Recreation & Park Association*

Some of the key ideas from the session were the acknowledgment of how important parks and recreation agencies are for stress reduction in society and the roles of agency managers. One of the challenges is to get more diversity into parks in urban areas by making them relevant to people’s interests and needs and accessible to all citizens. An initiative in connection with the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service is *Find Your Park*. It aims to celebrate parks and address the next generation of park users.

The success of bringing parks to the people lies in coalitions to support community livability, which includes access to parks. Collaborations among agencies are important

and professionals in parks and recreation can pursue opportunities with various professionals in public health, transportation, community development, and crime prevention. Organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Departments of Transportation can all be potential funders of park and recreation programs.

Research is also needed coming from these various disciplines. Data currently being compiled by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) through a program called PRORAGIS may help communities determine baselines for services and help to promote the value of parks. Making research data available for practitioners to use in management is a key goal that will require creative efforts from academics as well as professionals.

The second session of the 2014 Think Tank focused on **Progress Not Perfection: Thriving during Stress**. Presenters were:

- *Chris Dropinski, Managing Partner, GreenPlay, LLC*
- *Art Thatcher, Project Consultant, GreenPlay, LLC; President, Virginia Recreation & Park Society*

The focus of this session was on workplace behavior as well as working outside the workplace “on-call” 24/7. The presenters raised the questions of what kind of work places are expected and how important is responding “within minutes?” Further, the problems of people staying connected during time-off and vacations were also raised regarding impacts on family and social life. Not having time for reflection and too much multi-tasking diminishes the value of the quality of work. Whether standards are set too high is important for both supervisors and line staff to consider.

Several specific techniques for thriving were offered for professionals to consider:

- Avoid what stresses you
- Alter the circumstances, change what you can
- Adapt to your circumstances, reframe
- Accept what you cannot change
- Have realistic expectations
- Cultivate allies at work
- Talk it out
- Maintain a positive attitude, find humor in the situation
- Seek progress, not perfection
- Put your job in perspective- what’s really important



Another session focused on **Community Health and the Built Environment**. Presenters were:

- Cate Townley, Built Environment Specialist, Colorado Department of Health & Environment
- Jessica Osborne, Initiatives Director, GP RED
- Robby Layton, Principal & Founder, Design Concepts

This session emphasized providing information to help people be more active. A hands-on walkability exercise called *WalkScore* gave participants an opportunity to examine available walking opportunities for people and what paths provide the best experiences. A summary of how this exercise was incorporated with other data can be found in GP RED Research Brief #1 (available at <http://www.gpred.org/research-briefs/#brief-1> ). Using an assessment tool related to walkability could be useful to individuals from different agencies within a community. It may be helpful in determine what walkable access means. Principles of walkable streets can also be considered such as lane widths, curbs, sidewalk widths, building placement and design, on- street parking, and uses of flower boxes and other aesthetic amenities.

One example of a project undertaken to involve youth in assessing their communities is the *Safe Access to Recreation Opportunities* project in Prince George's County, Maryland, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth, ages 10-19 years, were asked to "show us what your community is like?" The project used PhotoVoice, a participatory research technique that enables youth to take photos, describe the pictures, and then add what should happen to make places better for safe use of their community recreation facilities. Project managers created an online map showing the photos with narratives, and the different modes of travel used by youth to get to recreation facilities, the mall, and other community destinations. Project managers then shared the information with policy makers and others to provide data about improvements needed in the community. More information about using PhotoVoice can found in GP RED Research Brief # 4 (<http://www.gpred.org/research-briefs/#brief-4> ).

*Integrating physical activity  
as an integral and routine  
part of community life  
is essential to address  
community health.*

For example, \$1.6 billion is spent on health issues in Colorado. Various programs are now underway such as *Making the Healthy Choice* and *Public Health Improvement Plans*. Many active living policies in Colorado, for example, do not include parks and recreation, which is an aspect that should be addressed.

The fourth session, entitled **Balancing Sustainable Tourism with Local Needs**, added another dimension to the discussion of promising practices in the field of parks and recreation. Presenters included:

- *Kelly Bricker, Professor, Parks Recreation and Tourism, University of Utah*
- *Cindy Heath, Executive Director, GP RED*

Sustainable tourism acknowledges the negative side and promotes and supports the positive side of tourism within local communities. Sustainability should be a journey toward vibrant communities. The Global Sustainable Tourism Council provides a common language among organizations to help build sustainable tourism practices. The standards suggested include 100 indicators for sustainably managing cultural and natural resources, and also provides performance indicators.



Incorporating sustainable tourism as an aspect of community vibrancy and health is necessary for designing collaborative processes. The promising practices that sustainable tourism offers to communities include issues of justice and fairness, healthy habitats for people, relationships between people and the land, stewardship, community building, economic vitality, community resilience and healthy ecosystems.

Due to many recent events a session was given on **Disaster Preparedness Planning and Outdoor Recreation Response (ORR)**. It was presented by:

- Kathy Spangler, V.P. of U.S. Programs, Save the Children
- Art Thatcher, Project Consultant, GreenPlay; President, Virginia Park & Recreation Society

The number one question asked in this session was, “Are you ready to respond?” Disasters might include active shooters, floods, hurricanes, forest fires, earthquakes, hazardous materials, and tornados as well as other catastrophes. The *Outdoor Recreation Response* (<http://www.gpred.org/education/operation-rescue-response-orr/>) provides a model that can be fit to any agency. A core of individuals should be trained so they can be deployed to assist communities who experience incidents (disasters). Parks and recreation can be proactive with emergency management planning.

*The major role of parks and recreation in disaster response is to help people return to normal as quickly as possible.*

Parks are also staging grounds for various operations, and community centers provide shelters when disaster strikes. Establishing a relationship with FEMA before disaster strikes is important so these individuals know what parks and recreation can offer. If parks and recreation departments can manage special events, they certainly can be integral in assisting with disasters.

Parks and recreation agencies can also be a part of a community’s child protection program. A parks and recreation department can be situated as part of the protection team. Agencies can be actively involved in planning to assist children to find normalcy after a catastrophe, but must

be proactive. *Save the Children* has a kit that can be most useful to agencies as they plan to help their communities and especially children.

The final structured session was entitled **Connecting the Dots**. It was facilitated by:

- Ken Snyder, Executive Director, Place Matters
- Cindy Heath, Executive Director, GP RED

This session was primarily a discussion of key points raised earlier during the two-day Think Tank. A number of resources and programs were mentioned that might be useful for further information. Examples included:

- *Walk Out, Walk On*, by Margaret Wheatley- examples of social and community change from around the world
- *Social Physics*, by Alex Pentland--a scientific approach on how ideas spread
- Interaction Institute for Social Change—training around critical engagement skills
- World Café Model-- helps bridge context and concepts together such as transportation and public health
- Exploratory Scenario—uses impact analysis tools such as how GIS can bring perspectives and understanding to linkages
- Appreciative Inquiry—build on what works by discovering what’s good and how to make “good” better
- Open Space Technology—uses the law of two feet (whoever comes are the right people to be in the activity)



## Action Plans

*The desired outcome of the 2014 Think Tank was to consider action steps that could be taken by participants both personally and professionally.*

In a group sharing exercise, several action items were identified that individuals and their agencies could undertake as well as projects that could be collectively considered:

- Keep in touch and connect with other Think Tank participants as future references
- Make better use of GIS and add component-based inventories
- Use WalkScore and discussions of connectivity within an agency
- Be more of a “face” for the community
- Walk the Talk – especially health wise
- Expand Employee Fitness
- Use measurements within an agency especially related to satisfaction
- Realize and embrace that positive stress is OK, and sometimes even necessary
- Pay attention to the importance of marketing and the MESSAGE
- Focus on trans-disciplinary outreach
- More dialogue on key issues for cross-discipline collaborations
- Identify and celebrate Successes – Tell our stories well!
- Identify cross sector/collaboration models
- Break down cylinders of excellence – enhance connectivity with federal/state/local agencies and organizations
- Inventory younger in-house staff skills – GoPro, YouTube, etc.—and use them
- Create a Research Repository – do cooperative studies with universities and associations to create access to research for non-academic practitioners
- Fill the gaps between academia and practitioners
- Consider how to translate research for greater dissemination
- Overcome the FEAR of trying new approaches

The final activity included brainstorming future Think Tank themes and improvements. Ideas suggested included: strategic partnering, using trans-disciplinary language, changing the provider role to the facilitator role,

change management, conflict management, networking effectiveness, developing communities of practice and peer to peer communication, engaging youth in meaningful ways, community resiliency, positioning, and branding parks and recreation.

## Evaluation Information

To move forward with future Think Tanks and to assess the outcomes of the gathering, evaluation reports have been compiled each year. RRC Associates has implemented the participant survey. Some results may be of interest to readers and has also been useful in planning the upcoming Think Tank in 2016.

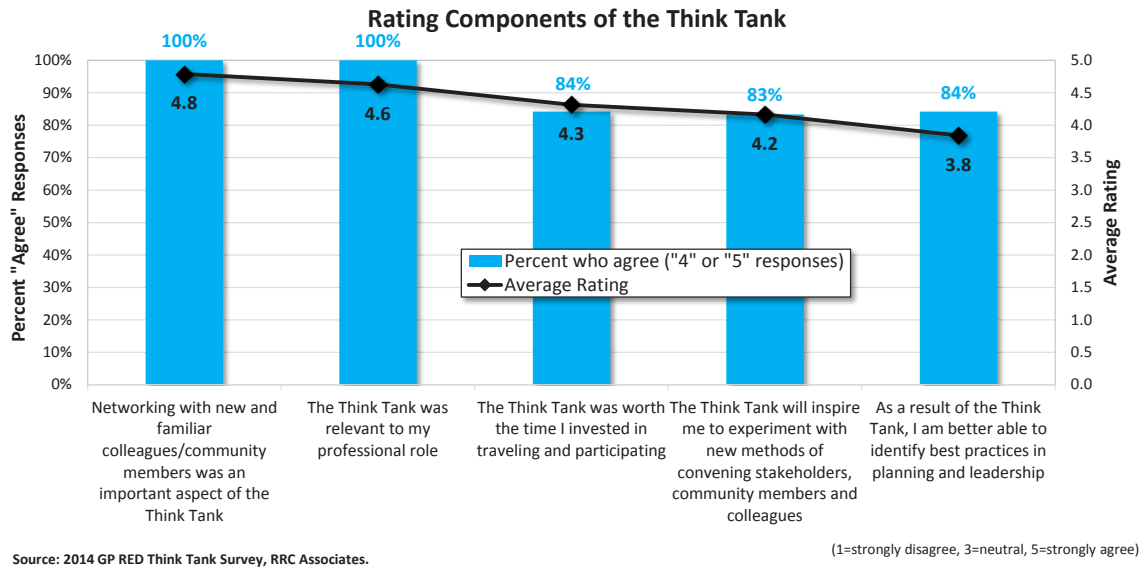
The majority of the participants (63%) were local park and recreation professionals followed by public health (16%), federal government (5%), landscape architecture (5%), research (5%), and other professionals (some identified as more than one affiliation). The most highly ranked aspect of the Think Tank was networking followed by relevancy and worthwhileness (See Figure 1). About 84% of the participants stated that a Think Tank such as this one should be offered every other year. Although viewed positively, respondents felt that too much was offered in such a short time. One participant said, “There was too much to get done in too little time.” Nevertheless, several insights summarized the value of the Think Tank for particular individuals:

- Stories of innovation and leadership
- The connection of a larger movement to solve issues in the park and rec field
- Public health needs to work with multiple city entities in order to effectively change policy and systems related to improving the health of our community
- The need to speak the same language across disciplines and professional sectors. Also, I learned that for a small agency, we are providing well for our community



## Rating Various Aspects of the Think Tank

- Following the 2014 Think Tank, RRC Associates polled attendees to determine ratings on the various aspects and areas for potential improvement and focus.
- The most highly-rated aspect of the Think Tank was networking (4.8 out of 5)
- 83% of respondents or more agreed that the Think Tank helped with networking, was relevant and worth the time, inspired them, and improved leadership skills



## 2016 Think Tank

Planning is underway for the 4th GP RED Think Tank in 2016. It will be held in Annapolis, Maryland on November 2-4. The theme is **Green Places, Healthy Communities: Innovations and Solutions**. For more information, see the website at [www.GPRED.org](http://www.GPRED.org), or contact [info@GPRED.org](mailto:info@GPRED.org).

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