



RESEARCH BRIEFS

Translating Research to Practice

WHAT IS A PARK?

A Proposal for a Working Definition within the
Parks and Recreation Field



GP RED
Research Briefs

#12

Defining a clear description of what is meant by the term “parks” is critical if parks are to be thoroughly understood and managed effectively. This document is intended to initiate a more consistent lexicon for talking about parks and prompt a deeper consideration of what a park is and what we mean when we talk about parks.

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What is a Park?

Parks and other places, often referred to as greenspaces, have become increasingly important in recent years as an antidote to a number of chronic public health issues related to sedentary lifestyles and the stresses of modern life. Parks have also played an important role in creating a more sustainable environment through water quality management, carbon sequestration, and relief from the effects of urban heat. They have also served as wildlife habitat, buffers against flooding and other natural disasters, and a place of refuge when disasters occur.



The outbreak of COVID-19 revealed the importance of parks as places of respite and relief during an infectious disease pandemic. The profile of parks was raised in the conscience of people worldwide who sought ways to combat loneliness, depression, and other effects associated with stay-at-home orders and the closure of public gathering places. The resulting crush of visitors and associated management challenges have people talking about parks more than ever, **but what are we really referring to when we talk about a park?**



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The Shift from Private to Public Places

We think of parks today as places belonging to everyone and open for the enjoyment of all. But the use of the word “park” in the English language has shifted over time and originally meant something very different. In early times, the public realm was confined to such places as the market plaza, forum, and churchyard. Shared tracts referred to in English as “commons” were made available to the general public for agriculture and the pasturage of animals. The people who used these places were referred to as commoners. In England and elsewhere, these lands were usurped over time by royalty and nobles for use as private enclosures where they could enjoy themselves at the exclusion of commoners. The word “park” originally referred to such enclosures. The poor were sometimes allowed to continue walking within them but were mostly excluded from the very places they had previously relied upon for their basic needs.



Tatton Park, Knutsford, England

Photo by JR Harris via Unsplash

The resulting gentrification prompted the English Parliament to pass an act in 1592 prohibiting any further creation of such enclosures within 3 miles of the City of London’s gates. In recognition of the importance of common lands near urban areas to the public’s general health and well-being, the act specifically made it unlawful to divide such areas in any way that hindered the “walking for recreation, comfort, and health of her Majesty’s people” (Olmsted, Jr. & Kimball, 1928, p. 5). Thus, it became a matter of law and policy to protect some areas from encroachment by private interests and keep them open to all.



Tatton Park, Knutsford, England

Photo by JR Harris via Unsplash

Where enclosures were allowed to remain after the act’s passage, the general public was often allowed within them to walk and enjoy other forms of recreation. This proved to be quite popular, and by 1649, public use of private parks had grown to the point where the lands were declared property of the Commonwealth. Thus, private parks became public places, and by the latter part of the 18th century, access to them had essentially become a public right. Today, it is common areas open to all, rather than private enclosures, that are typically referred to as parks.

Providing Parks as a Public Amenity

By the early 1800s, cities were rapidly expanding outward into new suburbs, and it was common for land speculators to include private parks open to the public as amenity features within new developments. Within the city itself, however, densification associated with rapid urbanization brought the depletion of public space. In 1833, the English Parliament appointed a committee to address the loss of walks and open spaces “fitted to afford means of exercise or amusement to the middle or humbler classes” (Olmsted, Jr. & Kimball, 1928, p. 7). The committee was instructed to consider “the best means of securing Open Spaces in the vicinity of populous Towns, as Public Walks and Places of Exercise, calculated to promote the Health and Comfort of the Inhabitants” (Ibid, p. 6).

In the United States, the 19th century was a time of social reform aimed at improving living conditions in industrializing cities. The provision of public parks became a key part of governmental policies established to improve public health and well-being while promoting democratization and the “Americanization” of expanding immigrant populations (Cranz & Boland, 2004). The 10th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (referred to as the “police power”) authorizes and enables the creation of parks and recreation departments and other land management agencies, which provide and manage parks for the public’s health, safety, and welfare.



To meet the needs of the general welfare, parks are managed not just for recreation, but also for conservation, wildlife habitat, hazard mitigation, resource protection, historic preservation, and a host of other purposes. The types of lands managed for these purposes include greenways, trails, rights of way, and other forms of what is often referred to as greenspace, all administered under the purview of “parks.” This has led to ambiguity in the meaning of the word, hampering communications between park professionals, policy makers, researchers, and others involved in decisions about where and how parks should be provided.

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Current Lexicon

Today, the Oxford Dictionary defines a park as “a large public garden or area of land used for recreation,” but as explained above, the term is commonly used more broadly. To further complicate things, the challenges of managing parklands have led to a plethora of policies, procedures and ‘best practices’ among different agencies to guide decisions. Out of these has emerged a nuanced vocabulary used to refer to parks, including categorical terms such as neighborhood park, community park, regional park, etc. While commonly used, these labels are inconsistently applied from place to place (and often within a single agency as well). This lack of clarity makes it challenging for agencies to accurately identify and measure their own assets, let alone compare them with those of other agencies.

Similarly, scores of research papers can be found within the literature that use the word park without offering a clear description of what is meant by it, yet doing so is critical if parks are to be thoroughly understood and managed effectively. With that in mind, this document is intended to initiate a more consistent lexicon for talking about parks and prompt a deeper consideration of what a park is and what we mean when we talk about parks.

Developing Working Definition of the Term

First, let's agree that anything designated as a 'park' or 'greenspace' should have spatial characteristics, meaning that it is a three-dimensional objective feature with edges that define its boundaries on the earth's ground plane. Conceptually, it extends upward into the sky and down into the ground. But it could also be located on the roof of a structure or in a subterranean space, with a defined top and bottom. Thus, it has a definite size and shape. Next, let's agree that it has some qualities that relate to the outdoors and differentiate it from indoor places. This distinction is usually obvious, but could be ambiguous in the case of a facility that is partially or entirely covered with a roof, such as an athletic stadium or a theater with a retractable roof. Our proposed definition should allow for some flexibility in deciding whether such a place is a park or an indoor facility. We suggest that the determination be made based on how "outdoor" it feels.

The next characteristic is the intended purpose of the place. We propose using 'park,' 'greenspace,' and other related terms within the parks and recreation field to refer specifically to lands managed for the health, safety, and welfare of the general public

beyond the basic needs of producing food, clothing, and shelter. This would include places intended for recreation, conservation of natural or cultural resources, and mitigation of natural hazards. It would not include large open areas that may be managed or maintained by a park agency for public benefit, but do not serve any of these purposes (an airport or freeway interchange, for example). It could, however, include community gardens dedicated to the production of food by members of the public, but lands owned by the public and leased out for agricultural use and closed to the public would not be considered parks.

Thus, in our definition a park or greenspace is a three-dimensional place that is primarily outdoors and is intended for use by the public for recreation, conservation, or mitigation.

References

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