

# Introduction

## Working Upstream: Focusing Attention on Health and Other Benefits of Nature

BY LINDA E. KRUGER

Having enjoyed camping with my family while growing up on a farm in Michigan, then working as a state park ranger in Michigan and later in Alaska, and now completing my 20th year doing research on recreation and communities, I have a very personal interest in what is happening in outdoor recreation. It is frightening! I am also very concerned about our country's declining health conditions and escalating health care costs.

Budgets for many local and state park and recreation departments have been substantially reduced. Signs that say "Park closed due to budget reductions" are springing up across the country. At the same time, we are spending an ever increasing amount of money on health care with 17.3 percent of the total economic output in the U.S. going to health care in 2009, up from 14 percent in 2008, and forecast to be 20 percent in 2011. That is one in five dollars! This is happening at the same time that research is identifying a variety of mental and physical health benefits that can be experienced from beneficial contact with nature. Beneficial contact ranges from wilderness therapy, to benefits of hospital, school, and community gardens, urban nature centers and neighborhood parks, and includes something as simple as a walk in a forest. Healthy people and healthy forests and healthy recreation programs depend on each other.

In support of upstream efforts that motivate people to stay healthy the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009)

recommends translation of scientific findings into community and school practices to protect the health of people where they live, work, learn, and play. The articles included in this issue of *Rural Connections* respond to this call by the CDC. I appreciate the Western Rural Development Center's interest in this topic and their invitation to be guest editor for this issue. I'd also like to thank the contributors who have made this issue of *Rural Connections* so diverse and comprehensive.

In the first article I summarize the many reasons I agree wholeheartedly with the Forestry Commission of England that forests are "Nature's Health Service." From physical and mental health disorders to stress, injuries, and even cancer, spending time in nature has been shown to improve health conditions, and time spent together in nature, can build community capacity while improving the individual health of participants. Other articles in this issue cover these topics in much more depth.

In the second article Dr. Kurt Beil, a professor of Environmental Medicine, and practitioner of naturopathic and Chinese medicine in Portland, Oregon, explores the positive effects of nature on mental health, mental activity, cognitive attention, and stress reduction. Beil also discusses the benefits of nature for recovery from mentally and physically stressful situations including surgery and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The next two articles draw our attention to obesity—now a global pandemic. Wimberly, et al. develop a conceptual model

for understanding the influences of obesity in rural areas and outline a study that maps and analyzes patterns of obesity and risk factors across the United States. Gittelsohn, et al. focus even more specifically by introducing us to the Obesity Research Prevention and Evaluation of Intervention Effectiveness in Native North Americans (OPREVENT), an ongoing study of research, prevention, and intervention effectiveness in six American Indian tribal communities in Michigan and New Mexico.

Next, Debra Kollock, a Washington State University County Extension Director, touches on prevention of childhood obesity while drawing attention to the improved natural, social and human capital that resulted from a community clean-up and community garden. Both activities brought people in the community together and engaged them in outdoor activities. Kollock finds that youth are learning about the environment while gaining "skills and knowledge that will break the cycle of childhood obesity and diabetes." Henderson and her colleagues at North Carolina State University and Texas A&M University report on IPARC—a North Carolina State University initiative to explore and measure the ways communities promote physical activity. They report on findings from a survey of Parks and Recreation Directors in North Carolina that provide a baseline for facilitating promotion of physical activity in community settings.

Bricker et al. discuss the results from a study of Forest Service recreation managers. The study found 90 percent agreement that

Forest Service managed lands increase the quality of life for surrounding communities. Respondents identified a connection between healthy communities and sustainable recreation on Forest Service managed lands. In her article, Sue Goodwin dispels the myth that rural children inherently have a healthy relationship with nature and the outdoors. She suggests that with increasing demands on parents in both rural and urban environments “developing a positive

relationship with nature and increasing outdoor physical activity is equally important for rural and urban youth.”

Finally, Daniel Dustin and his colleagues at the University of Utah draw our attention to the importance of understanding the broad benefits of nature by taking us on a trip to Yellowstone National Park and providing a history of the discovery of DNA matching. To echo these authors “we must

employ creative approaches...that illustrate complex ecological interrelationships and interdependencies, make environment-health connections explicit, and motivate us to get back to nature, learn from nature, and live our lives in harmony with nature.” I hope this issue of *Rural Connections* gets us all moving in that direction. ■

