

Pandemic Impacts on Rural Recreation in Beaver Creek, Yukon



This research was conducted on the traditional territory of the White River First Nation in the community of Beaver Creek by the World Leisure Centre of Excellence at Vancouver Island University in collaboration with the Recreation & Parks Association of the Yukon over the Summer of 2022.



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Definitions

Community Hall is the name used to refer to the former Beaver Creek Community Club facility. The name change reflects the change in management responsibility from the Beaver Creek Community Club to the White River First Nation. This building is owned by Yukon Government and managed by the White River First Nation, but it is a Beaver Creek community facility.

Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada has been replaced by two departments of the Federal Government, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada and Indigenous Services Canada. White River First Nation members referred to themselves as an INAC community, indicating that they are one of the three Yukon First Nations that have not signed self-government agreements.

Modified world café is an approach used to collect data from participants, allowing them to review the answers already provided by others. It typically resembles a series of simultaneous focus groups, each focusing on a different topic. Participants move from table to table until they have addressed all the discussion topics. The approach used in this study included writing several questions on poster boards and inviting drop-in participants to review the previous answers before adding their own.

Participatory rural appraisal (PAR) is a research approach that engages residents in the processes used to inform policies, procedures, and programs. It can include several data collection methods but most often includes qualitative approaches that allow community members to share their voices.

Potlatch House is the name the White River First Nation uses to describe the facility currently under construction near their administration building. This space will be for WRFN cultural activities, gatherings, and meetings.

“Recreation is the experience that results from freely chosen participation in physical, social, intellectual, creative and spiritual pursuits that enhance individual and community wellbeing” (Canadian Parks and Recreation Association/Interprovincial Sport and Recreation Council, 2015). The research team approached this project with the above perspective on recreation.

Abbreviations

BCCC – Beaver Creek Community Club

CBSA – Canadian Border Services Agency

INAC – Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada

RCMP – Royal Canadian Mounted Police

RPAY – Recreation and Parks Association of the Yukon.

WRFN – White River First Nation

SARB – Sport and Recreation Branch

VIU – Vancouver Island University

WLCE – World Leisure Centre of Excellence.

YG – Yukon Government

Introduction

This report presents the preliminary findings of the June 2022 community engagement process that focused on recreation as a vehicle for pandemic recovery in the community of Beaver Creek, Yukon. Located on the traditional territory of the White River First Nation (WRFN), Beaver Creek is a community of approximately 100 residents who fit into three broad categories: (a) WRFN members, (b) non-Indigenous long-term residents, and (c) short-term residents who are posted to the community for two to five years (e.g., CBSA or RCMP).

The research was conducted by a team from the World Leisure Centre of Excellence (WLCE) at Vancouver Island University (VIU) in collaboration with the Recreation & Parks Association of the Yukon (RPAY) with financial support from the Government of Yukon through its COVID Recovery Research program. The WLCE team was supported by the WRFN Recreation Coordinator, who introduced the team to the community, and by several Beaver Creek residents. These findings are being shared with the White River First Nation, Yukon Government's Sport and Recreation Branch (SARB), and RPAY.

This project was guided by two distinct but complementary purposes: (a) to better understand how the pandemic impacted residents of rural communities, how recreation is experienced and delivered in rural communities, and how recreation can be used for pandemic recovery, and (b) to provide insights to the WRFN and SARB as part of their recreation planning process.

Methods Used

This study used a participatory rural appraisal approach to engage residents and key stakeholders within the community. Prior to entering the community, permission and endorsement was received from the White River First Nation.

The team collected data on June 14th and 15th through face-to-face interviews with four community members and conversations with community members at a modified world café process. A graffiti table was also used, but Beaver Creek has an extremely small population of children (only 5 students attend the school), and some opted to engage in the world café instead. Most of the community-level data was collected on June 15th through the world café held at a community BBQ, co-hosted with the WRFN, and attended by staff of the SARB (who provided logistical support for the BBQ) and RPAY.

Recruitment of participants to the BBQ/World Café was done during a community tour on June 14th and through flyers delivered to mailboxes by the Recreation Coordinator. This proved to be very successful as approximately 50% of the community stopped by the community hall during the research activities (45-50 people of mixed ages).

Detailed researcher notes, interview content, and data from the world café and graffiti wall were explored using thematic analysis. The research team organized the preliminary findings into categories aligned with the questions. The final sections, conclusions and considerations are presented in broader thematic areas that emerged from the data.



Preliminary Findings

To address the research questions and meet this project's dual purposes, the WLCE researchers sorted their findings into broad categories that aligned with the questions asked. The following sub-sections summarize what participants told the team about recreation and its delivery, current and future activity participation, the importance of the community hall to Beaver Creek, the pandemic, and the role of recreation in recovery. The final section speaks to the existing facilities in the community, their current state of disrepair, and their role in the future health and wellbeing of residents and the community.

The Meaning of Recreation

The participants in this study used an expansive definition of recreation when describing activities offered and wanted within the community. Beaver Creek has a baseball diamond, curling rink, and outdoor hockey rink, so it was not surprising to see these three sports identified. However, a stronger emphasis was placed on traditional *on-the-land* activities (hunting, fishing, gathering traditional foods), crafts (beading, sewing,

knifing), contemporary outdoor activities (hiking, skiing, snowmobiling), and less active games like horseshoes, card games, and darts.

Participants of all ages clearly identified recreation as an important social space/activity. Several participants noted that connecting with others by sharing food was a strong motivator for engaging in recreation activities.

The research team found that participants' perspectives on recreation were closely aligned with the ones used to ground this project. Beaver Creek participants highlighted the breadth of socio-emotional and physical benefits that result from diverse recreation activities.

Program Delivery

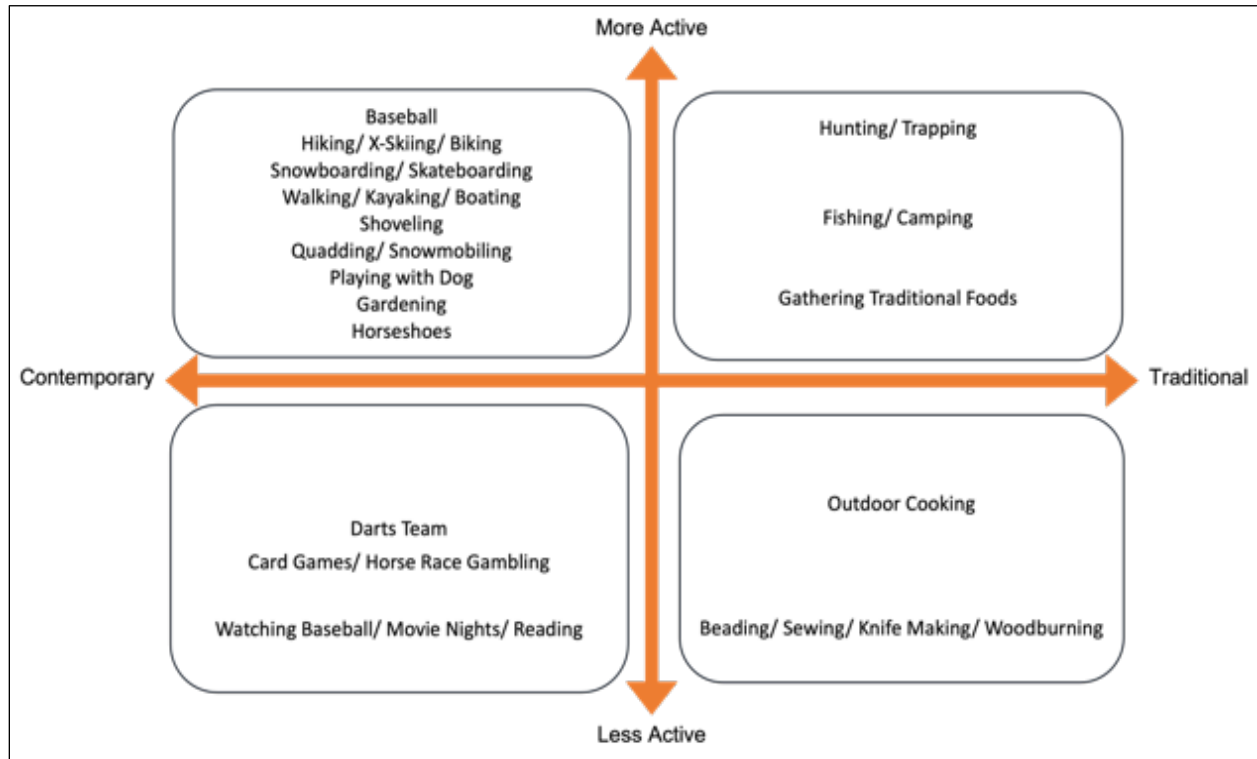
Responsibility for recreation delivery transitioned from the Beaver Creek Community Club to the White River First Nation in early 2020. While this was viewed positively by participants, it has also led to challenges in the management and delivery of recreation (compounded by the pandemic). During the transition it was determined that the facilities, once managed by the BCCC, need significant repair and that the responsibility for the repairs lies outside the control of the WRFN. At present, the community of Beaver Creek is waiting for YG to upgrade/repair their facilities, which limits their ability to hold ongoing programs and events.

Currently, recreation delivery in Beaver Creek appears to be defined by special events and informal gatherings. There were no on-going recreation programs identified for children and regular programming for adults was either event based (horseshoe tournament for a community birthday) or offered by local businesses (darts and watching sports at the 1202). Participants of the study anticipated that renewed recreation spaces will allow for expanded programs in the future.

Activity Participation

Participants identified a broad range of recreation activities that varied in levels of physical exertion and varied between contemporary and traditional practices. Figure 1 illustrates the activities identified sorted on a spectrum from contemporary to traditional (left to right), and from less active (bottom) to more active (top). The sorting of these activities is based upon the researchers' knowledge and represents an "average" perspective. Individuals may approach these activities on a different scale of physical output or feel that they are linked more strongly to traditional practices.

Figure 1: Activity Participation in Beaver Creek



Desired Future Activities

The future of recreation delivery in Beaver Creek depends on the engagement and participation of community members. Study participants were asked what would bring community members out to an event. Common themes were traditional activities, physically active recreation, food, and socialization.

Findings from the World Café indicated that on-the-land or traditional activities would be a primary motivator for many. Suggestions included culture camps and healing circles, hunting and fishing workshops, making Bannock, and fire making (bonfires). It was apparent that a focus on land-based activities was very important to participants.

Many participants also indicated that they would likely attend sport or physically active events to play or watch. Several sports were suggested including:

- Hockey
- Roller-skating
- Dance
- Biking
- Softball/Baseball
- Curling

Other participants noted that less active activities, such as tea making, bonfires, and playing card and board games were desirable. It was identified that there are many

residents living with mobility and health challenges that prevent them from engaging in contemporary sports. However, it was also noted that modified physical activities (e.g., through physiotherapy, occupational therapy, recreation therapy) would be welcomed.

Another common theme was that socialization opportunities and food were major motivators for engagement at events and activities. Numerous participants mentioned that if community gatherings included meals, such as community BBQs, they would be more likely to attend. Event organizers also commented that events had higher turnouts if food was involved.

Potential Community Leadership

Several participants indicated that they would be willing to share their knowledge and skills with others in the community. It was noted that this was already happening with individuals showing others how to properly clean fish, hunt, sew, and speak the Upper Tanana language. These traditional activities happen throughout community, at the school, and in homes. It was emphasized that this type of leadership is critical for sustaining local culture. Others identified that they were willing to teach canoe making, beading, and archery.

There were several general recreation activities that participants were willing to teach, lead, or coach. Skateboarding, ATV and snowmobile safety, hockey, line dancing, hip-hop music, skating, and event planning were some of the identified activities. These activities can be intergenerational and bring people together.

Importance of the Community Hall

The community hall was identified as facility of high importance to the physical and mental wellbeing of Beaver Creek residents. This facility is a social space that allows people to gather for several forms of recreation and special events. The three areas of the facility, (a) gymnasium, (b) kitchen/lounge and (c) curling rink, were historically used for sports (skating and curling), social gatherings (e.g., dances), special events (e.g., weddings), cultural practices (e.g., drum making and beading), and as place for the school to hold physical education. Participants noted that the community hall was home to diverse intergenerational activities that brought the community together.

Participants noted that the use of the facility by the school was most important during the coldest parts of the winter, when holding physical activity outdoors was not always safe or practical. The hall is the only public building that is accessible and can

accommodate the whole community; a fact that marks its significance. Unfortunately, the ramp enters into the building through the kitchen/ lounge which is closed due to weather damage and needs repairs. At the time of this research, the only usable space was the gymnasium.

Despite the change in management, the community hall still has a Beaver Creek Community Club sign on the side. While the name is likely a cosmetic change for some, it was noted by a few participants that the BCCC was not always a welcoming space for some WRFN members; therefore, changing the sign is important to reflect the change in management and in the culture of the facility.

COVID Impacts

The community of Beaver Creek has a unique geographic position, being closer to many services in Alaska than those offered in Haines Junction or Whitehorse. During the pandemic this caused significant impact on Beaver Creek residents as the border was closed to Canadians but remained open for Americans who were moving in or out of the state.

For some, the remoteness of the community presented opportunities to be on-the-land and a feeling of being freer and safer than those in urban centres. Others indicated that their anxiety related to COVID was heightened due to the number of strangers who stopped for supplies while travelling through the community. One business manager noted that although outsiders crossing the border lessened the economic impact of the pandemic, the business was approximately \$400,000 in debt due to lost revenue.

The most common impact of the pandemic related to feelings of isolation and separation between community members and families. Restrictions and guidelines on gatherings resulted in “bubbles” that divided Beaver Creek and the WRFN into small social groups. For those with larger families and/or family living in Alaska, this had a profound impact. Chief Bessie Chassé of the WRFN reflected on the emotional stress that resulted when family members were prevented from entering each other’s houses and forced to maintain small bubbles. She noted that it was difficult to limit her children’s contact with their cousins to outdoor play, particularly since there are so few children in the community. A young girl also spoke of the lack of social interaction that was a result of being limited to playing with her brothers and father.

If social isolation and loss of activity engagement were identified as the primary result of the public health guidelines, sadness, depression, and anxiety were the primary

results of the isolation. As many of the Elders in the WRFN also experience health challenges, there was also significant stress and anxiety experienced by those trying to care for them.

On a more positive note, participants did recognise the unity of the community during this difficult period. Participants shared that they felt supported by other community members. A few of the participants who had experienced COVID noted that other residents dropped-off food and supplies. Significant support also came from community members who volunteered to make grocery and supply runs to Whitehorse, and to prepare meals for elders, families, and those who were ill.

One participant noted that the isolation gave them a chance to slow down from their regular activities and have time for self-reflection. Another mentioned that while group activities were halted, gym access was still available, and others continued with their physical activity either through Zoom or by spending time on-the-land.

COVID Recovery

Participants were asked what activities or events would help the people of Beaver Creek recover from the impacts of the pandemic. The most common responses focused on those that would bring community members together and that were traditional, outdoor activities.

Participants noted that pandemic recovery had started with bringing community residents back together (despite some feeling anxious about this). Community activities that were suggested included: bingo, a community-wide garage sale, BBQs, sports leagues, horseshoe tournaments, mini golf, and other social gatherings. Participants also wanted opportunities to socialize with people from other communities; whether inviting communities to sports tournaments and gatherings hosted in Beaver Creek, or by travelling to visit nearby communities.

Findings from the world café showed that many believed recovery from the pandemic could be done through traditional on-the-land activities. Participants suggested hosting multi-day land-based camps and retreats, as well as shorter workshops, for both adults and children. It was argued that these activities should include spiritual teachings and other traditional activities to help the community cope and heal from the negative impacts of the pandemic. It was also suggested that workshops on developing coping skills (i.e., depression and anxiety) would be useful.

Future of Recreation – Infrastructure

Beaver Creek has a number of recreation facilities that hold great potential for programming; unfortunately, nearly all require significant upgrading. The two facilities that hold the greatest promise and align best with the needs and wants of residents are the community hall and the covered outdoor rink.

As previously noted, the community hall provides Beaver Creek residents and the school with an accessible, multipurpose recreation facility. The local post office is located in the building and also requires repairs. While the entire facility needs updating, the most pressing concern is a leaky roof and associated water damage to the walls. The building, owned by Yukon Government, is slated for some repairs in 2023; however, there was significant concern that additional damage will occur over the next winter.

The outdoor rink facility (Figure 2) holds potential to be a versatile and important recreation facility for Beaver Creek. This facility is a gravel floored arena surrounded by decaying boards and covered by a well-constructed roof system that needs some minor repairs. Community members would like the floor to be covered by pavement or cement so the facility can be used for other purposes in the summer season (e.g., as a temporary skate park or to hold larger community gatherings). In addition, some of the boards needs to be replaced as they are not water tight. It was suggested that netting be placed around the building to keep birds from roosting in the rafters.

Figure 2: Outdoor Rink Facility



Conclusions

Beaver Creek residents showed great enthusiasm for diverse recreation programming. It was clear that on-the-land activities were seen as vital for recovering physical and mental health. However, it was noted that more sedentary, social activities like sewing, beadings, and playing games like cards and darts were important for mental health.

Given the extreme temperatures of winter, and accessibility needs of Elders, renovating the community hall is vital for community recreation and for pandemic recovery. The hall provides a place for school-aged children to be physically active but, more importantly, it provides an accessible, intergenerational, social space where skills and knowledge can be shared and where community members can reconnect.

The transition of recreation services from the Beaver Creek Community Club to the White River First Nation was viewed as a positive step. For example, it was noted that the community hall will be seen as a more welcoming space for all community members. While recreation programming has been limited since the transition, the new Recreation Coordinator has many ideas for the future and residents identified numerous activities that they were willing to lead, coach, or teach.

The challenges facing recreation service delivery, and thus pandemic recovery through recreation, appear to be: (a) the condition of facilities and lack of control over maintenance, (b) a Recreation Coordinator who fills numerous roles within the community (i.e., role overload), and (c) the need for capacity building related to grant writing and program leading.

Considerations

The research team recognizes that the snapshot of recreation programming in the community is limited; however, the themes that emerged from the data were supported by multiple data collection methods. The following areas for consideration are based on the preliminary research findings:

1. Given the repairs needed to facilities and the availability of grants for such repairs, it may be useful to seek support and training for grant writing.
2. The community hall is a vital element of infrastructure. Changing the name of the building will reflect more than just the change in management. WRFN may

want to approach the Government of Yukon, with support from the SARB, leveraging a new community recreation plan to prioritize facility repairs.

3. Recreation service delivery can be viewed as the “job” of the Recreation Coordinator. It was learned that several community members are willing to assist with recreation delivery. Therefore, the roles and responsibilities of the Recreation Coordinator should be reviewed with a greater focus on coordination rather than direct program delivery. Moreover, part-time program leaders can be encouraged through funding programs (e.g., RPAY’s RHEAL Leader program).
4. Social gatherings and on-the-land activities were identified as two of the most important recreation activities for pandemic recovery. Once space is available, hosting gatherings with Elders that focus on sharing traditional skills and storytelling will be important for mental and spiritual wellness.
5. Recreation for adults is as important for their health and wellbeing as it is for children. Including adults and Elders in recreation planning can ensure that there are adequate opportunities for all. Partnerships with companies like the 1202 and Buckshot Betty’s can increase access to recreation through the additional social and recreation spaces that these businesses offer.

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank Quanah van der Meer and Chief Bessie Chassé for the warm welcome and support during our stay in Beaver Creek. Quanah provided the research team with a master class in what it means to live in a rural community and promoted the BBQ and world café so that more than half of Beaver Creek’s residents attended. Thanks also to Quanah and Jane Rogers for preparing the food for the BBQ. Finally, thank you to those who attended the world café, who invited us into your homes during our community tour, and who took the time to be interviewed by our team. It was an honour and privilege to be in your community and we hope that our work will be useful in the recreation planning process moving forward.

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