

Pandemic Impacts on Rural Recreation in Dawson City, Yukon



This research was conducted on the traditional territory of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation in the community of Dawson City 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

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.

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

Figure 1: Multi-use Trail Signage



Abbreviations

CoD – City of Dawson Parks and Recreation

TH – Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation

KIAC – Klondike Institute for Art and Culture

RPAY – The Recreation & Parks Association of the Yukon

SARB – Sport and Recreation Branch

VIU – Vancouver Island University

WLCE – World Leisure Centre of Excellence

YG – Yukon Government / Government of Yukon

Figure 2: Art & Margaret Fry Rec Centre Ice – Sinking Floor



Introduction

This report presents the preliminary findings of the August 2022 community engagement processes that focused on recreation as a vehicle for pandemic recovery in Dawson City, Yukon. Located on the traditional territory of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation (TH), the community of Dawson is approximately a six- to eight-hour drive from the capital city of Whitehorse. With an average age of 40.5 years, the age profile of the 1,577 residents in Dawson City matched the general population of the Yukon. In addition, the [2021 Census](#) revealed that of the 836 households in Dawson City, approximately 92% were owned by residents living in the community.

This study was conducted as part of a larger project by researchers 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 funding from the Government of Yukon (YG). The WLCE team was supported by the City of Dawson Parks and Recreation (CoD), which promoted and helped organize community engagement events. The Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation science advisor informed the team that, as the research did not target Nation Members, permission from the Chief and Council to conduct research within their territory was not needed.

This project aimed 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. Results will be shared with CoD to assist with future recreation planning and with RPAY and YG Sport and Recreation Branch (SARB).

Methods Used

This study used a participatory rural appraisal approach to engage residents and key stakeholders within the community. The team collected data from August 27th to 30th through three modified World Café engagement sessions held at (a) the Artist's Market, (b) Minto Park Concession, and (c) Klondike Institute for Art and Culture (KIAC). CoD hosted a Toonie Swim (at a reduced rate) during the Minto Park session to increase family input. Four CoD staff and four community members were interviewed.

Recruitment was done through posters and social media. Events were hosted in public spaces with a large banner to attract attention. The team was also in Dawson City longer than other communities, allowing for word-of-mouth recruitment.

Detailed researcher notes, interview transcripts, and data from the world cafés were explored using thematic analysis. The preliminary findings were placed into categories aligned with the questions. The final sections of this report present conclusions and considerations from the broader thematic areas that emerged from the data.

Preliminary Findings

Findings are organized into broad categories that align with the questions asked in the World Cafés and address the research questions. The following sub-sections summarize what participants told the team about recreation and its delivery, current and future activity participation, the impacts of recreation and tourism, the pandemic impacts, and the role of recreation in recovery. The final section speaks to the role of recreation in pandemic recovery.

The Meaning of Recreation

The residents of Dawson City have a broad understanding of recreation that focuses on health and wellbeing, social connection, and participating in enjoyable activities. The most notable descriptors were enjoyment, community, and social connection. Several community members noted that freedom, in the form of vaccination choices, was an element of defining recreation.

The benefits of recreation were also linked to community connections and wellbeing. There was particular emphasis on the importance of recreation and access to indoor facilities during the dark and harsh winter months. Participants and recreation staff identified that access to recreation services in the winter was linked to maintaining sanity and mental health.

The only negative statements about recreation were linked to closing facilities during the pandemic and implementing and enforcing vaccine passport mandates. Participants noted that these created divisions and that children were most impacted.

While *activity* was identified as a defining element of recreation, there were no references to specific activities. Responses to other questions revealed that most were focused on physical activity rather than other forms of recreation (e.g., arts, crafts, and other less active pursuits).

Program Delivery

Interviews revealed that programs offered or facilitated by the CoD staff tended to focus on children and youth. Programming for older adults was identified as needing more suitable indoor spaces (e.g., the school gymnasium was unavailable during the day). It was also noted that community members and other organizations offered additional programming, particularly arts and culture.

Analysis of the activities that individuals participated in during both summer and winter revealed that the outdoor infrastructure and amenity developments (e.g., the disc golf course, well-maintained biking and ski trails, and the outdoor swimming area) were popular and appreciated by residents. These spaces also allowed individuals and families to engage in self-led and spontaneous recreation.

Activity Participation

Unlike those living in many other rural communities in the Yukon, Dawson City residents have access to several indoor recreation facilities and more developed outdoor infrastructure (e.g., fields and trails). The increased access to community recreation facilities may help explain why sports played a more central role in the physical activity of residents in Dawson City compared to those in other rural communities. However, like most communities, there were strong indications that residents predominantly engaged in outdoor, on-the-land activities throughout the year.

Sporting Activities

Summer sports participation included disc golf, golf, softball, cricket, and soccer. Winter sports identified included curling, hockey, skating, and skiing. Muay Thai was identified as being a year-round sporting activity.

On-the-land Activities

Participants identified on-the-land activities as those they participated in regardless of the season. Walking and hiking were the most identified on-the-land activities in summer and winter. Other summer activities included subsistence activities such as fishing, gardening, hauling water, and walking in the bush. Winter activities included fishing, hauling water, chopping wood, and hunting. Several participants identified snowmobiling as a winter activity, and while it is motorized, [research](#) has shown that sledding can be the equivalent of moderate to intense physical activity.

Desired Changes to Recreation Programming

Residents were asked to identify what they would change about recreation services in the community. Most recommendations were tied to recreation facilities, either wanting new ones or increasing access to existing ones. Ideas for new facilities included:

- Indoor playground.
- Walking/running track.
- Larger/permanent outdoor rink.
- Indoor activity space (e.g., Yoga, Dance, & Martial Arts).
- Go-Cart track.
- Mini golf course.
- Pickleball court.
- Parks spaces for preschoolers.
- Public showers for those off the grid.
- Spaces for adult programming.

Other recommendations include increased programming for children and adults, increased frequency of specialty programming (e.g., bike camps), and healthier options (e.g., food options at events or adult programming not linked to drinking).

Potential Community Leadership

Participants were asked to identify activities they would be willing to teach, coach, or lead for other Dawson City residents. It became clear that a strong volunteer ethic already exists within the community. We had one young adult who indicated that they did not feel they had anything to offer; however, they also showed strong interest in training and mentorship opportunities.

The following activities were those identified by residents as ones that they would be willing and able to teach, coach, or lead:

- Any sport!
- Skiing.
- Snowboarding.
- Skateboarding.
- Muay Thai.
- Hockey skills for women.
- Running events.
- Stick gambling.
- Hand games.
- Connecting youth with Elders.
- Supporting and empowering single parents.

Existing Facilities and the “New” Recreation Centre

Dawson City is not only one of the larger rural communities in the Yukon; it is also incorporated and has multiple paid staff members. It has several recreation facilities,

including an ice rink, curling rink, baseball field, swimming pool, exercise gym, and soccer fields. Additionally, City of Dawson has invested in a disc golf course and a network of hiking and biking trails. There were many discussions about the “new” recreation centre and the challenges presented by the current facilities.

The hockey rink was identified as an essential winter recreation facility – with a diverse cross-section of Dawson City’s population playing hockey. It was also recognized as the most problematic facility regarding ongoing maintenance and repair. At the same time, there was a clear sense of pride and accomplishment from those involved with keeping the building going. All also assumed that a new ice rink would be included in the much-anticipated, new recreation centre.

It was noted that a temporary outdoor rink was created during the pandemic. Residents indicated that they would like the outdoor rink to continue. Staff identified that having a permanent outdoor rink space (i.e., cement floor and boards) would allow for more efficient ice creation and use for other activities. An outdoor rink space was also identified as an essential additional recreation space when the indoor rink was unavailable (e.g., closed by health measures).

The pool was identified as an important summer recreation facility; some felt it should be open year-round. A discussion with recreation staff revealed that while there would likely be some demand for pool use mid-winter, there was already significantly reduced demand by late August. It was also noted by recreation staff that keeping the pool open during the winter is not feasible or sustainable.

COVID Impacts

Community engagement sessions revealed that several residents felt socially isolated and discriminated against because of their stance on vaccinations or unwillingness to get vaccinated. Numerous comments focused on two aspects: (a) that recreation is essential and no one should be excluded, and (b) the City of Dawson is responsible for the public health mandates.

Some residents noted that increased social isolation led to depression and general reductions in overall mental health. The impact on children was of particular concern, with limited social contact with friends and loss of physical activity being the most noted. The isolation was also linked to divisions in the community over vaccine mandates that led to sub-groups within the community.

The lack of recreation opportunities, particularly hockey and socializing, was directly linked to feelings of depression and reduced mental health. This was compounded for some as they experienced sadness and guilt for those who lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

Those who spoke about reduced recreation participation spoke almost exclusively about indoor (facility base) recreation or the inability to travel. However, numerous residents identified limited impact and even positive recreation outcomes experienced during the pandemic. Several noted that they engaged in more outdoor activities like skiing and other activities that could be done solo or within a family group.

Increased family togetherness was a benefit experienced by some, but this was not universal, as others were isolated from their families. This was particularly hard for those unable to travel for important family events such as memorial services.

COVID Recovery

When asked how recreation could help Dawson City and its residents recover from the pandemic, it was clear that people strongly believe in the link between recreation and health. Physical and mental health were the most common responses, with respondents equating physical activity to happiness and recreation to mental health.

(Re)building community and social connections was also identified as an essential role for recreation post-pandemic. Residents suggested hosting events like community BBQs to bring people back together. One participant noted, "recreation builds people, and people build community."

A few participants suggested that the City of Dawson should capitalize on mountain biking to draw more visitors, while others asked for additional hiking trails for that purpose. However, others also felt that enough visitors were coming to the community.

Future of Recreation – Infrastructure

While there was much talk about the new recreation centre, there was also a lack of knowledge about what it may include. The importance of hockey to the community, combined with the current state of the existing ice rink, suggests that a new ice surface is a priority for community members. This could include building an outdoor facility that would allow for self-led recreation and an alternative to the indoor rink should it need to shut down again.

Other calls for space were primarily focused on those that could be used for multiple purposes, such as martial arts, dance, exercise classes, yoga, and places for adults and older adults to gather. It was identified that the City of Dawson did own some indoor social spaces (e.g., the lounge in the curling rink), but that staff could only sometimes use them for programming. Retaining control of existing areas could alleviate the pressure to build more.

Conclusions

Dawson City is a rural community blessed with recreation infrastructure and dedicated staff. Like many rural communities in the Yukon, programming tends to focus more on children; however, there were higher levels of adult programming than seen in other communities. These facilities also provide the necessary spaces for sports to be played in the community, with hockey identified as a vital activity in the winter months.

Community members have strong feelings about the need for improved or enhanced recreation facilities; however, there was little indication that they understood the actual cost of running the facilities nor the exact number of users. There appears to be a belief that all communities should have facilities like those offered in Whitehorse or larger urban centres. Clarity about the actual costs of operating and maintaining these facilities may be needed to ensure that residents are more realistic about what a rural community can sustainably offer.

The research revealed that several community members felt excluded and discriminated against by the enforcement of vaccine mandates. It was found that, for some, this has led to perceptions of community divisions and it was suggested that community recreation programming could be a way to address these divides. Clarifying the role of the City of Dawson in creating and enforcing vaccine mandates may help reduce tensions some feel toward recreation staff.

Considerations

The research team recognizes that: (a) this report is based on a community snapshot, (b) data collection was limited to those residents who attended the world café and were interviewed in August 2022, and (c) the timing of the research (end of the tourism season) can impact perspectives on tourism. Therefore, the following are offered as considerations for future recreation planning in Dawson City:

1. Efforts to (re)build community cohesion and reduce social isolation should be prioritized. This should include educating the public about the role of the City of Dawson Parks and Recreation in creating and enforcing public health mandates.
2. Construction of new recreation facilities should include a fully developed and costed operations and maintenance plan as part of the feasibility study. These costs should be communicated to community members.
3. Construction of new recreation facilities should be multi-use, accessible, and include social gathering spaces suitable for different age groups.
4. The City of Dawson Parks & Recreation does incredible work in the community, and residents understand the link between recreation and the health of children and youth. Promoting these benefits for adults and older adults may also prove beneficial.
5. The City of Dawson may want to research residents' sentiments toward tourism to understand better the perspectives of residents who enjoyed the reduction in visitors during the pandemic. It could also help identify potential tourism products and residents' desire for alternative tourism markets.

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Thank you as well to those who attended the world café 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 to your future recreation endeavors.

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