

Pandemic Impacts on Rural Recreation in Pelly Crossing, Yukon



This research was conducted on the Territory of the Selkirk First Nation 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.



This project was funded by the Government of Yukon under the Yukon COVID-19 Recovery Research Program.

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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 local 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 voice.

“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

RPAY – Recreation and Parks Association of the Yukon.

SFN – Selkirk First Nation

SRB – 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 participation and delivery in Pelly Crossing. 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 Yukon Government's COVID Recovery Research program. The preliminary findings are being shared with the Selkirk First Nation (SFN), Yukon Government (YG) 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 on 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 useful to the SFN and SARB to assist with the recreation planning process currently underway.

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 of the project were received from the Selkirk First Nation.

The team collected data on June 7th and 8th through (a) conversations and a graffiti board at a community BBQ, (b) a modified world café approach, and (c) interviews with key informants within the community.

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 that aligned with the questions asked. 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 to meet the dual purposes of this project, the WLCE researchers sorted their findings into broad categories that aligned with the questions asked. The following eight (8) sub-sections provide summaries of what

participants told the team about recreation, their participation, and its role within the community of Pelly Crossing.

The Meaning of Recreation

Residents who engaged in this study clearly identified that recreation programming offered by the SFN focused on sport and programming for youth. When asked *what recreation means to you*, participants used a much broader definition of what recreation was and often focused on the outcomes and not the activity. Some noted that it was simply fun and enjoyable, while others identified the importance of socializing and gathering together. Being active and achieving positive physical and mental health outcomes was another strong theme.

The only specific activities identified were those that related to traditional practices (beading and sewing) or being on the land (hunting and fishing). The significance of these activities became clearer as they were spoken of in response to several of the other questions asked.

It is noteworthy that sport and sport participation were not identified as the meaning of recreation. The children who participated in the graffiti wall at the BBQ, did identify some sports but were equally or more likely to list berry picking, fishing, hunting, cycling, or playing on a digital device as they were to say baseball or hockey.

Benefits of Recreation

Analysis revealed that community residents perceived various benefits from recreation. There were three main themes including collaboration and socialization, mental and physical wellness, and leadership and personal growth.

The findings revealed that recreation is a space for socialization through community engagement and working together. One participant noted a benefit of recreation is that it “brings people together to connect” (World Café) and others stated that recreation results in “engaging in togetherness with others” in the community (World Café).

The participants recognised that recreation played a role in mental and physical wellness. Improvement of mood, stress relief, better sleep, as well as making healthier choices and increased brain function, were among the most prominent mental benefits identified. Physical wellness was mostly connected to being physically active (e.g., playing sports); however, participants did not indicate what that involved.

It was identified that youth and younger adults could develop leadership skills and experience personal growth through recreation and sport participation. One participant noted that a benefit of recreation was the “development of teamwork and collaboration skills to positively and efficiently work with others” (World Café). Other participants noted that recreation could help people develop the ability to focus and create goals (World Café & BBQ).

Program Delivery

The programs which are delivered within the community consist of afterschool programs, adult programming, and special events. Afterschool and adult programs come from the Department of Citizen Development’s Recreation Programs, which tend to consist mostly of sports (e.g., hockey, volleyball), but will also include seasonal camps and special events.

Participants of the study noted that there is some overlap and duplication of services between different SFN Departments. Specifically, it is through the special events and camps that program overlap with other departments was identified (e.g., Heritage, and Health and Social Services). It was further noted that collaboration and communication between departments has been challenging, due in part to heavy workloads and vacant positions.

While the Recreation Department was clearly identified as being responsible for providing recreation and sport services, it was also noted that the Heritage Department and the Department of Health and Social Services also used recreation (albeit not sport) to achieve their desired program outcomes. The findings suggest that this has led to some confusion as to which department is responsible for the delivery of different recreation services.

COVID Impacts

The research revealed two major themes about how COVID-19 impacted the community residents. The most prominent and commonly identified issue was the decline in mental health. Isolation from others within the community, and from other communities, was a key contributor of this impact beginning with public health restrictions that led to a full shut-down within Pelly Crossing. Another impact of the restrictions and recurring shut-downs was an increase in anxiety related to engaging in activities with others. Ultimately, this anxiety led to reduced rates of participation in recreation.

Some individuals also noted that there were personal benefits to the pandemic, as people found time to slow down and relax. The reduced work demands allowed time to focus on recreation activities which took place on the land or within their homes. There was also time for traditional activities that did not require indoor facilities despite the requirement to stay within family bubbles while engaging in these.

Strengths of Community

The importance of life on the land is vital to this community and has been for generations. Pelly Crossing, surrounded by forests and rivers, is plentiful in its land resources. There is evidence that older generations are involved in carrying on traditional activities and practices, such as traditional medicine making, hunting, fishing, and harvesting.

Participants noted that they have access to a wealth of cultural knowledge held and shared by Elders and leaders. Programming and experiences that included harvesting berries, hunting, fishing, and snowshoeing as well as less active practices such as beading, sewing, and sharing of language, have created a strong sense of community togetherness and unity within Pelly Crossing.

When asked what they could teach, share or coach, participants identified a variety of recreation and sports activities and traditional practices.

- Sewing
- Traditional activities
- Traditional Medicine making
- Whittling
- Sports: Softball, hockey, baseball, yoga
- Basket making
- Willow chair making
- Women's workout/group fitness

Activity Participation

Recreation participation as described by the participants were sorted into four distinct but overlapping categories: (a) sport, (b) on the land, (c) daily life, and (d) traditional practices. These activities were all found to have physical and/or mental health benefits.

Participants identified both individual and team sports and physical activities that included hockey, curling, skiing, baseball, basketball, volleyball, gym/workout, home exercise, and yoga. However, it was also suggested that the majority of local sport programming was targeted at youth or young adults, leaving others without access to sport or needing to travel to other communities to participate (e.g., curling in Mayo).

On-the-land activities were found to have many of the same benefits as sport and physically active recreation. The activities identified included fishing, ice fishing, berry picking, walking, trapping, camping, snowshoeing, biking, and building snow shelters. It is worth noting that many of these activities are linked to the traditional cultural practices of the SFN and thus are either practiced within each family or more commonly programmed by the Heritage Department.

Other traditional practices identified by participants included; beading, whittling, fur hat making, willow chair making, and making traditional medicines. Although these activities may not offer the same physical benefits as sport, they provide mental health benefits and a broader range of life-long activities in which people participate.

When asked about physical activity, participants noted that daily life in a rural community provided opportunities to be active. Collecting and splitting fire wood, shoveling, and walking for transportation all contribute to the overall health and wellbeing of residents.

Broader definitions of recreation also tend to include activities that are mentally engaging or relaxing, versus only those that are physically active. Participants of the study indicated that they enjoyed reading, sewing, beading, and art. Several community members also mentioned, with great enthusiasm, how popular bingo was in the community. Moreover, the opportunity to socialize with others was important to mental wellbeing yet was noted as something that was missed over the past two years.

Future of Recreation – Activities

When asked about the future of recreation delivery in Pelly Crossing, participants' responses mostly related to three categories: sports, non-sport recreation, and issues related to age and skill levels within programs. Findings related to sport delivery highlighted the need for activities that require fewer players such as pick-up basketball or tennis. Several participants identified the need for structured practices within the community for youth. Additionally, it was suggested that adult and youth tournaments, particularly those with other communities, would be desirable.

Dance classes and events (both traditional and modern), as well as fitness and nutrition classes, were all identified as potential recreation activities. These particular activities may present opportunities for engagement by older adults who are currently being missed in program offerings (Interview participant).

The last category related to the future of recreation addresses the challenge of diverse ages within a smaller population. It was noted by participants, and observed by researchers, that the relatively small population of youth and adults within Pelly Crossing resulted in a significant age range in activities. While intergenerational participation in many traditional activities is highly desirable, it is less appropriate when related to sport and athlete development. It was also observed that most programs targeted school aged youth. In contrast, there were older adults who identified a lack of social programming for them.

Teens in the community noted that they did not want to always participate with younger children in sport programs. This factor, and a lack of interest in sport, leads to youth disengaging from sport activities. It was also identified that there was limited sport programming for young children, something that could be addressed by offering T-ball or TimBits hockey (Interview Participant).

Future of Recreation – Infrastructure

Participants indicated that for the future of recreation, renovations and maintenance of existing infrastructure and new facilities were needed. Several participants noted that a resolution to build a community recreation centre had already been passed but nothing had been built. It was also mentioned that there is currently a lack of space for youth to gather.

Community members indicated a need for renovations on the curling rink and youth centre as both are in serious states of disrepair. Participants discussed that buildings were aging, moldy, had leaking pipes, were poorly maintained, and that some were condemned.

While some participants spoke positively about the new pool being built, they also noted that Pelly Crossing was lacking facilities that were available in other rural communities. Another theme related to new infrastructure focused on activities that require fewer people to participate. Suggestions included new basketball hoops, a tennis court, skate park, and a trail network.

Conclusions

Analysis of the data revealed common themes related to recreation governance, delivery, and participation regardless of the methods used to collect the data. There were some differences between the responses of those who were younger (i.e., <35

years) and those who were older; however, there were consistent responses related to the needs of youth in the community.

The primary value of recreation in the community was identified as promoting mental and physical wellbeing, achieved through activities that require physical exertion and those that resulted in stress relief, relaxation, and more focused thinking. In addition, participants were in strong agreement that recreation (in all forms) promoted social connection and community engagement which ultimately contributed to individual and community wellbeing.

The level of recreation and cultural programming in Pelly Crossing is astonishing; however, a consistent message relayed was that current levels of delivery may not be sustainable due to limited resources. Human resources were noted as the most limited in availability (i.e., having qualified staff), and those who were working in recreation delivery were often filling multiple roles within the SFN and the broader community. Whether a contributing factor or a result of role overload, it was also identified by several participants that there has been limited collaboration between SFN Departments (recently restarted) which has led to the duplication of services/programs.

It was found that residents and SFN staff identified a wide range of activities as *recreation* and clearly use these activities as a vehicle to achieve outcomes related to health, wellness, cultural maintenance, and social connection. Most of the activities identified could be sorted into *on-the-land*, *sport*, or *general leisure activities*. In contrast, it appears that the majority of the recreation programming offered has a clear focus on sport, except for special events/camps. As the benefits of recreation were more closely tied to the on-the-land and general leisure activities, it may explain why there is a lack of support for the delivery of recreation programs.

Finally, a lot of focus was placed on sport and recreation infrastructure, particularly as it related to offering programs to youth. Two common rationales for the development of more infrastructure were given; (a) to provide youth with the space to play or keep them busy, and (b) a perceived lack of access when compared to other communities (e.g., Mayo, Carmacks, or Dawson). The other main theme, related to existing infrastructure, highlighted its state of disrepair and the overall lack of funds for maintenance and renovation.

Considerations

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

1. Using a broader definition of recreation, and including more programming that focuses on activities other than sport, may increase the perceived value of recreation services within the community. It may also lead to increased collaboration between departments and reduced duplication of services.
2. Traditional crafts and on-the-land activities were identified as important recreation activities for all ages. It was noted that increasing the use of on-the-land practices in recreation programming could promote both physical and mental wellbeing, while encouraging youth to disconnect from digital devices. Increased inclusion of these activities in ongoing programming could be considered.
3. The need for greater collaboration and a broader perspective on recreation, sport, and cultural programming was identified. The SFN may want to consider the creation of a Recreation Advisory Committee (or something similar) that assists with developing cohesive plans that incorporate traditional activities, non-sport recreation, and sports.
4. The current division of programming between departments appears to have created both overlap and gaps in service offerings. The findings of this study suggest that consideration be given to different development stages (e.g., pre-school, children, teens, young adults, adults, and Elders) within program offerings. Examples would include providing sporting programs for younger children (e.g., T-ball) and focused skill development for teens. This may require greater coordination and collaboration but may help retain more teens and young adults in sports programs, and taking a similar approach to non-sport activities may result in programs that appeal to those not currently being served.
5. An interest in non-sport programming (traditional and contemporary activities) was noted by several participants; however, the findings of the study suggest that this type of programming is either not regularly offered or ceased due to the pandemic. While physical activity is a vital component of health and wellness,

other recreation pursuits that promote social connection, cultural connections, and enhanced artistic skills can be just as vital for mental wellbeing. The SFN may want to consider a balance between sport and non-sport activities in order to benefit the overall health and wellbeing of the community.

6. The final area for consideration relates to the development of a recreation infrastructure plan for the SFN. There are clearly high expectations and desires for more sports and community recreation facilities; however, there were also significant concerns about the maintenance and decay of existing facilities. The findings of this study suggest that the SFN may want to consider developing a long-term recreation infrastructure plan, that includes building, maintaining, and staffing facilities. Given the size of the community, a focus on recreation infrastructure that is less costly to maintain or staff (e.g., trails or an outdoor basketball court) may be more appropriate than investing in larger facilities.

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank the Selkirk First Nation for welcoming us to their territory and for helping promote the work that we have done. We are appreciative of the assistance of the Department of Citizen Development and the Recreation Staff for hosting the BBQ and baseball game, and for promoting the world café. We also thank all residents of Pelly Crossing who shared their thoughts, feelings, and ideas with us. 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.

We would like to acknowledge that this work was carried out in partnership with the Recreation and Parks Association of the Yukon with funding from the Government of Yukon under the Yukon COVID-19 Recovery Research Program.