

Green Scene: Appreciating Nature

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With a world increasingly challenged by many environmental problems including that of global warming, I sometimes worry that people are distracted and fail to notice the forces of nature which bind our world together are becoming increasingly frayed and weakened. Thus, I was much encouraged by a survey conducted for *Environment Canada* which showed a very high proportion of Canadians appreciated and understood the value of the natural world.

This recently-published study, available at www.biodivcanada.ca, examined awareness and attitudes towards nature expressed by 24,000 Canadians throughout 2012-13. It was estimated to have an accuracy which ranged from 2-4%. Nationally, 92% of Canadians were aware of the term “species at risk” and 76% of us had heard of biodiversity. Slightly fewer people were aware of what “ecosystem services” are; these describe the many vital services nature provides to us such as producing oxygen, creating fertile soils and purifying water through the water cycle. Apparently, 14% of all Canadians donate money to protect species at risk on an annual basis.

Volunteers lead regular walks on the Riverview Hospital grounds to help others appreciate the tree collection.

Norma Gillespie photo.

The survey also indicated that approximately 50% of Canadians had chosen to live in places, in part because of the access provided to nature. In BC, this proportion was higher with two thirds of the participants indicating they chose to live, in part, in places which offered access to nature (developers, take note!). More than half of those surveyed stated they had chosen to purchase products that were more environmentally friendly such as bird-friendly (i.e., shade-grown organic coffee) or recycled toilet paper. While this was an encouraging finding, it was not clear if making such purchases was done on a consistent basis.



An astonishingly high number of people (almost 90%) indicated they participated in some form of a nature-based activity in the past year. Admittedly, the criteria for such activities were very broad and included picnicking, gardening, reading about nature or viewing nature-focused media. In BC, only 29% of us had camped in the past year although 76% of us claimed to have gone hiking. However, the category of hiking included less rugged activities such as nature walks which likely accounts for the high proportion of participants. Some people would consider hiking to be a specific activity with a strong uphill component that often takes participants into alpine ecosystems. About a fifth of BC residents had gone birding or fishing in the past year. Those who hunted accounted for considerably less of the participants (7%). In this survey, golfing was, to my surprise, included as another nature-related activity in which 21% of us had participated. Agritourism, which I assume includes trips to local farmers markets, had a participation rate of 24%.

These rather broad categories for nature-based activities also probably account for the high number of days that BC residents appeared to have participated in such activities. For example, the average number of participation days for BC residents was about 130 days per year. Given that a typical BC year consists of a high proportion of rainy weekends, I can only assume that much of the nature-based activities in this survey must be indoor ones or consist of short neighborhood walks or, possibly, a quick trip to fill up the backyard bird feeder. Birders, a generally dedicated group, spent over 120 days per year bird-watching while anglers spent only about 30 days fishing.

Economically, spending on nature-based activities in BC contributed \$7.5 billion to the economy with annual expenditures of \$2300 per person. Most of this money was spent on transportation (21%), accommodation (8%), food (11%) or the purchase of equipment and payment of fees (27%). Sometimes, it can be a challenge to enjoy nature and, at the same time, minimize fossil fuel emissions.

I was surprised to learn that 13% of those surveyed reported they had volunteered for a nature-related activity in the past year. This could have been something as simple as participating in a shoreline cleanup or planting native plants. However, I have to admit, I am a little doubtful of these numbers. Whenever I have been involved with volunteer nature activities, we typically have 15-30 volunteers show up – and not the hundred or so that would be expected if 13% of Tri-Cities residents volunteer for nature at least once a year. I suspect the criteria for “volunteering” in the survey included things such as participating in annual events such as Fingerling Festival in Port Moody or Port Coquitlam’s Hyde Creek Salmon Festival. Regardless, volunteers are responsible for much of the good work that is done for nature in this community such as restoring streams, raising salmon, leading nature walks and invasive plant removal. We should be encouraging increased participation.

While this survey indicated a good level of general understanding and appreciation for nature, there is still much work to be done to educate others about the need to protect species at risk and preserve critical habitat. We also need to put more emphasis on building communities that will be resilient to the impacts of global warming while at the same time making efforts to reduce our dependence on the fossil fuels which are driving climate change.