



# Accessibility Research Report

June 2021



BC Parks

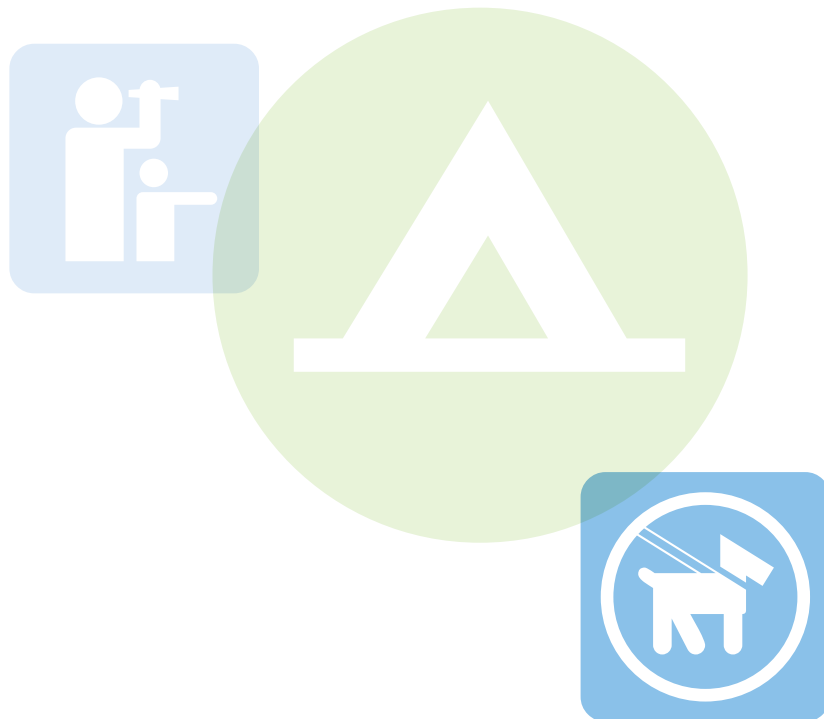






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# Executive Summary

BC Parks and SPARC BC partnered to conduct a survey about the experiences people with mobility limitations have accessing and enjoying BC Parks. The survey was designed to identify preferred activities and barriers to participation, and the results are applicable to all park jurisdictions because respondents did not differentiate between municipal, regional, provincial, or national parks. Survey data shows parks accessibility is more complicated than infrastructure improvements and needs to be embedded in an organizational culture.

Survey results indicate people living with disabilities experience them in combination with other issues that create complicated barriers both inside and outside of the park experience. Age, independence, social and family relationships, health status and economic position shaped the respondents' desire and opportunities to visit any park. Before arriving in a park, the main barriers centred around availability of transportation options, reliance on personal care networks to plan and visit, proximity to park space, and the cost of visiting parks.

The survey highlighted the most important facilities within the park experience and identifies key opportunities for park agencies interested in making their parks more accessible. The highest priorities identified in the survey were accessibility of pathways, parking, and toilets in parks nearest to municipalities or urban areas and alternative transportation options. Adopting a universal design approach for park facility design broadens the definition of accessibility to make the park experience better for everybody.



# Introduction

The B.C. government is committed to ensuring all citizens can meaningfully participate in BC Parks experiences. Since 2015, BC Parks has made a concerted effort to improve accessibility in its frontcountry parks by forming an external Accessibility Advisory Committee for strategic guidance, auditing 330 frontcountry park sites to identify present conditions and prioritized improvements, developing universal design guidelines for frontcountry parks, training staff and park operators in universal design and accessibility, and funding community-level adaptive equipment programming. Still, there are large gaps in BC Parks' knowledge about how people with disabilities interact with the park environment, and ways to promote opportunities for accessibility and inclusion.

The research discussed in this paper is a result of a fortuitous collaboration resulting from BC Parks' External Accessibility Advisory Committee discussions. The Social Planning and Research Council of BC (SPARC BC) partnered with BC Parks to survey B.C. residents that receive the Parking Permit for People with Disabilities (the disabled parking permit pass) issued by SPARC BC. The survey was designed to gather information to guide future work to make BC Parks accessible and inclusive for all people. Survey questions were directed at people with mobility limitations with a focus on learning more about their thoughts and experiences in visiting parks and recreation spaces across the B.C. The results were surprising in how they were both a reflection of deeply personal experiences and a spotlight on wide-ranging barriers and issues preventing people from enjoying parks.

## Background

Enjoying parks and natural areas is an important part of life in British Columbia, and people with disabilities are underrepresented in provincial park campground visits. Data from BC Parks' annual Visitor Satisfaction Survey from 2018 showed 7% of camping parties have at least one person self-identifying as having a disability, while at the same time, approximately 25% of B.C.'s population reported having a disability. Almost everyone will experience some type of disability (temporary or permanent) and be affected by disability among their close relations at some point, which makes this topic relevant to everyone.

Understanding the unique barriers that people with disabilities face in accessing and using BC Parks is the first step to increasing participation and equitable access to outdoor spaces for everyone. BC Parks is a branch of the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy that manages more than 25 million visits per year in 1,035 parks and protected areas. Working to build increased accessibility and inclusion has also been an important area of focus for the Social Planning and Research Council since it was first established in 1966 with a vision of working with communities to build a just and healthy society for all. Since 1985, SPARC BC has had the responsibility for the delivery of the Parking Permit Program for People with disabilities in B.C. and is in contact with more than 57,000 people annually who rely on this program.

## Disability and Accessibility in Context

Disability results from the interaction between individuals who have an impairing health condition and their personal and/or environmental barriers<sup>1</sup>. Institutional systems and built spaces, when not designed to accommodate people's diverse needs, can create disabling conditions for individuals, which means a person's experience of disability is constructed by a society and community that fails to adequately accommodate their needs.<sup>2 3</sup> Disabilities are dynamic because they can change depending on time, health status, socio-economic experience and environmental barriers,<sup>4</sup> and the BC Governments goal is to "work to identify, remove and prevent barriers that limit the full participation of people with disabilities in their communities."<sup>5</sup> This study aims to identify potential barriers and to explore opportunities to improve accessibility with a focus on furthering BC Parks' efforts to make the frontcountry park environment more inclusive for all people.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. Health Topics: Disability. <https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability>

<sup>2</sup> Chikuta, O., E. du Plessis and M. Saayman. 2017. "Nature-based travel motivations for people with disabilities." *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure* 6 (1): 3. Also see, Stumbo, N.J., Y. Wang and S. Pegg. 2011. "Issues of access: what matters to people with disabilities as they seek leisure experiences." *Work Leisure Journal*. 53 (2): 91.

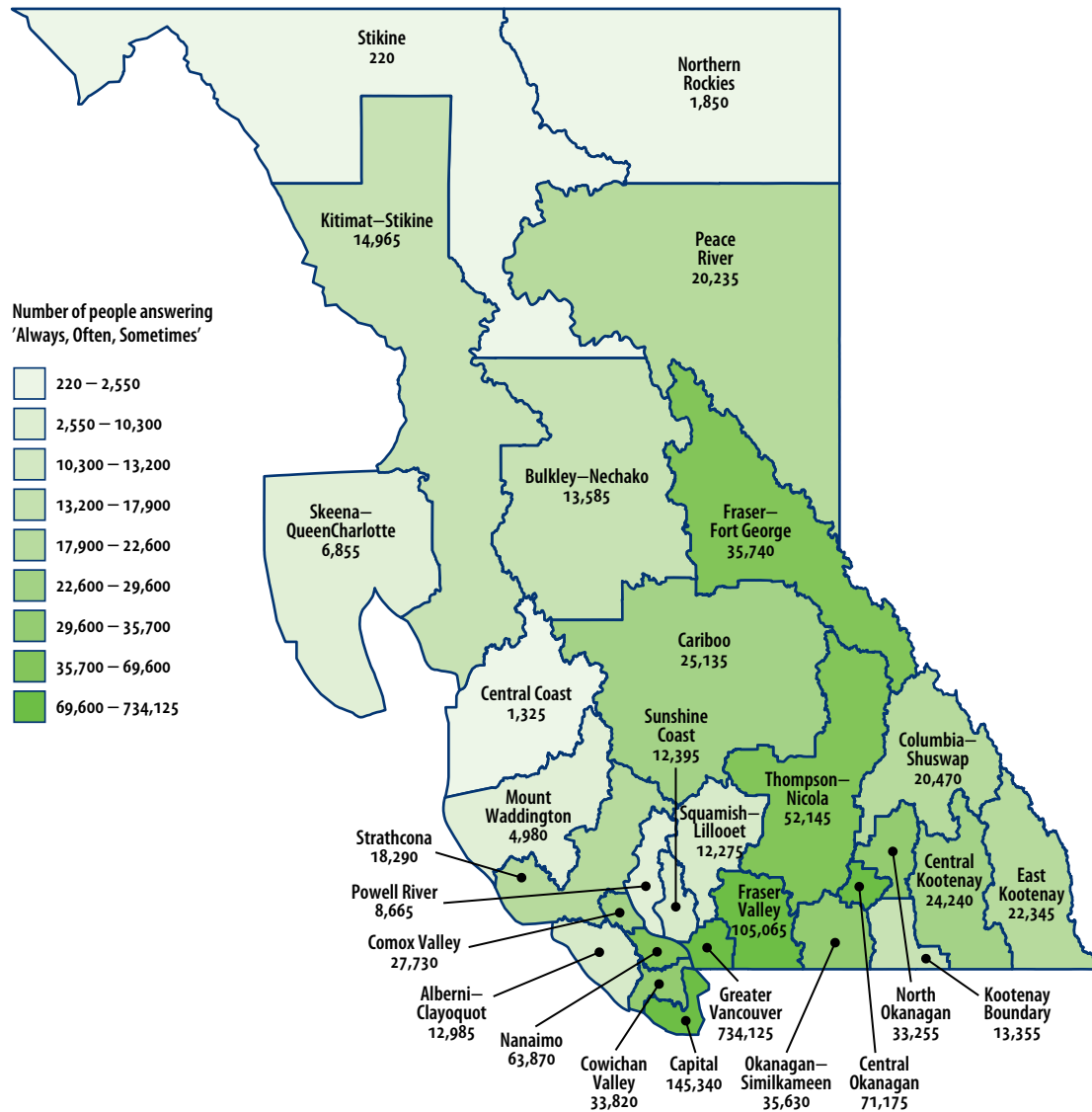
<sup>3</sup> Pérez, A. and S. Farber. 2012. "Participation and desire: leisure activities among Canadian adults with disabilities." *Transportation* 39 (6): 1055-1078.

<sup>4</sup> Morris, S. et al. 2018. *The Dynamics of Disability: Progressive, Recurrent or Fluctuating Limitations*. Statistics Canada.; Blichfeldt, B.S. and J. Nicolaisen. 2011. "Disabled travel: not easy, but doable." *Current Issues in Tourism* 14 (1): 80.

<sup>5</sup> The Province of British Columbia. 2020. *Summary Report Accessibility Legislation Consultation*, p 4. <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/government/about-the-bc-government/accessible-bc/disability-consultation/2019-consultation/accessibility-summary-report.pdf>



## Number of individuals with disabilities in B.C. by region (SPARC BC)



# The Study

Since BC Parks' annual Visitor Satisfaction Survey does not capture information from day users or people not visiting parks, a large proportion of the population, especially people typically underrepresented in parks, is missing from existing data. This research was designed to fill gaps in the information available to park planners and managers about people with mobility impairments' barriers preventing park visits and activity preferences, and improvements park agencies can make to increase visitation among people with disabilities.

The survey limits the definition of disability among the participant group to people with mobility-related disabilities based on the eligibility criteria to receive the parking permit for people with disabilities. Cognitive, sensory, and other disabilities did not meet the inclusion criteria for the survey even though 71% of people with disabilities in Canada commonly report having multiple disabilities, with the number of disabilities increasing with age.<sup>6</sup>

BC Parks and SPARC BC staff designed and mailed a nine-question, mixed method questionnaire shown in Appendix 1 to 20,000 accessible parking pass recipients in 2017.<sup>7</sup> SPARC BC staff received 1,983 completed surveys and manually entered results into a digital format before they were merged with demographic data.

## Respondent Profile

Overall, survey respondents reflect the demographic makeup of the parking permit recipients but skew older (88% of survey respondents are aged 60 or older) and closer to the Lower Mainland than the overall population of people living with disabilities in British Columbia. Individual data about race, Indigeneity, household makeup or income level is not collected in this survey.

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<sup>6</sup> Morris, S. et al. 2018, p 9.

<sup>7</sup> Survey respondents may have paid a \$26 permit has a \$26 processing fees and physician's offices may charge up to \$75 to complete the form. See more at Doctors of BC. "Information for patients on Out-of-Pocket fees." <https://www.doctorsofbc.ca/managing-your-practice/practice-supports/resources/patient-info-non-covered-fees>



# Survey Results

## Park Jurisdiction Context

Respondents did not accurately differentiate BC Parks from municipal, regional, or national parks. The survey asked respondents to name their favourite BC Park and 62% of respondents named municipal and regional parks as their first and second choices. Respondents' misunderstanding about park jurisdictions means the survey results can be interpreted more broadly in other park jurisdictions.

## Improving the Park Experience

Respondents shared throughout the survey that mobility-related barriers frequently dissuaded them from visiting BC Parks. Many respondents internalized inaccessible spaces as their own personal limitation to participation in outdoor recreation, but several themes emerged from almost 1,000 thoughtfully written responses that serve as tangible guidance for park managers.

When survey respondents visit parks, they overwhelmingly prefer to visit for shorter periods. While visiting day use areas, respondents reported diverse and personal activity preferences centred around nature appreciation, picnicking, walking or wheeling, meeting family and friends, sightseeing, enjoying specific activities and connecting with specific places.

The main barriers identified in the survey were related to the accessibility of paths, toilets, and parking. Path quality was the most mentioned accessibility concern, which refers to the experience of moving along a path, trail, walkway, route, or sidewalk throughout a park. Comments focused on the grade and the quality of paths, describing a preference for paved, short routes between transportation options and park features and amenities. Comments included "most parks do not have wheelchair paths" as well as comments that showed a desire for "more smooth paths and walkways." Some respondents reported a connection between their safety and path quality including concerns about the fear of the potential consequence of falling.

Many other amenities were mentioned, indicating people want to visit one or more features in the park, such as playgrounds, picnic areas and “accessible trails to beaches.” Unexpected recommendations for amenities included benches for frequent rests, “charging stations for mobility scooters” in day use areas, and electrical plugins at campsites: “I would love to camp in BC Parks but I need electricity for my medical device, which limits my options.” Everybody wants a good parking spot, and the survey respondents identified the availability of free accessible parking spaces close to amenities as a very significant barrier to visiting parks.

Respondents reported that washrooms were difficult to navigate and highlighted examples where accessible-advertised bathrooms were disappointing and misleading: “throwing a bar in a [washroom] cubicle doesn’t make it accessible.” Respondents also shared that they want washrooms that are accessible enough to be useful independently and private space in case they need a caregiver’s support. Respondents also expressed that washroom facilities should be near parking, since often the first place they need to go after arriving the park is the bathroom.

Employing a universal design approach to parks improves on addressing many of the physical barriers identified in the survey by making the interaction with the built park environment more inclusive and accessible to everyone by design.

## Barriers to participation

The Province’s public consultation on the *Accessible British Columbia Act* found 60% of people with disabilities face barriers to accessibility and inclusion in their daily life, whereas considerably more (89%) of survey respondents reported facing one or more barriers when accessing parks.<sup>8</sup> Factors preventing people from visiting parks varied widely from personal emotional factors to systemic problems. The statistical software clustered consistently mentioned barriers related to the broader categories of age and health status, financial constraints, transportation issues, and support networks.

When asked what prevents them from visiting BC Parks, respondents consistently referred to age and mobility-related challenges in the open-ended questions. Survey comments about mobility centred on three main

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<sup>8</sup> Province of British Columbia. 2020. Summary Report Accessibility Legislation Consultation.

themes: respondents' perceived ability, complications due to their use of a mobility aid, and their desire to visit a provincial park despite their stated disability. Comments focused on the intersection of age and health status and the subsequent impact on their ability to visit a provincial park. For example, one respondent shared that their "age and declining health prevents visits" while another commented that "at our ages—we don't go to BC Parks anymore."

Respondents shared that even though their mobility-related disability did not allow them to participate in activities at BC Parks, they still wanted to enjoy outdoor activities. For example, respondents shared "I would if I could," "I wish I could just get out and walk, but I am limited," and "would love to be able to get out but waiting for knee replacement."

Cost of participation in outdoor recreation, which includes not being able to afford personal mobility-aids or specialized equipment, was a continual theme in the survey. Other costs identified were travel, parking, equipment rental and other fees. This repeated mention of financial barriers reflects the lived experience of people with disabilities and seniors being more likely to experience poverty. The severity of their disability and their age makes the barriers even more significant.<sup>9</sup> Further, research shows a direct link between people with lower incomes and lower rates of outdoor participation<sup>10</sup> with household participation in outdoor activities increasing when household income increases.<sup>11</sup>

Survey results showed individuals prefer recreation opportunities that are closer to home, summarized by one comment: "we are happy with our local parks; they are close for our enjoyment." Transportation barriers are not only a problem for accessing parks; over half of Canadians with a mobility-related disability consider themselves housebound, with 20% saying it's because accessible transportation isn't available.<sup>12</sup> Further, seniors generally perform fewer trips and tend to travel shorter distances making destination travel less likely.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Statistics Canada. 2018. Canadian Survey on Disability, 2017; SPARC BC. "B.C. Seniors' Poverty Report Card," p 7. <https://www.sparc.bc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/B.C.-Seniors-Poverty-Report-Card.pdf>; See also Morris, S. et al. 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Scott, D. 2013. "Economic inequality, poverty, and Park and Recreation Delivery." *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 31 (4): 1-11

<sup>11</sup> Statistics Canada. 2015. Canadians and Nature: Outdoor Activities, 2013. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/16-508-x/16-508-x2015003-eng.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Statistics Canada. 2018. Canadian Survey on Disabilities 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Páez, A. and S. Faber. 2012. "Participation and desire: leisure activities among Canadian adults with disabilities." *Transportation* 39 (6): 1055-1078.

Although the BC Parks Accessibility Survey did not directly ask respondents about their care networks, respondents shared their experiences of social isolation, describing how they rely on others for transportation, trip planning and caretaking when visiting BC Parks. Written responses included many anecdotes about how they would historically visit parks with family and friends, but being a senior with a mobility-related disabilities also meant they were increasingly isolated and therefore more dependent on their extended families and communities to organize outings and get them outside. Others shared a desire for organized trips or group activities which would enable them to visit BC Parks more often. For example, respondents shared a desire for “planned activities,” “senior society trips,” and “a scheduled ssouting with other seniors and transportation provided.”

**“I would love to visit parks but depend on family for transportation”**

## Further Research

Further research is required to better understand accessibility in BC Parks for people with a range of disabilities. We know that people live with compounding impairments and chronic health issues and individuals experience disability in different ways. To ensure parks are as accessible and inclusive as possible, it means that research investigating the complex identities and experiences of people with disabilities would be valuable. To do this, future research should include people with a diversity of ages, disabilities, and identities. Future research could also ask questions about the different motivations and interests of people with disabilities as well as engage people with disabilities directly in research related to their experience when visiting the different frontcountry parks and natural areas across B.C. In undertaking this type of research, it is possible to build a better and deeper understanding of both the opportunities and the barriers that people face including the different ways to engage and motivate people with disabilities to visit BC Parks. This research should also include considerations related to the overall benefits arising from the different activities including the extent to which access to opportunities and the quality of their experiences can contribute to a deeper sense of connection and inclusion as well as their overall sense of wellbeing.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Labbe, Miller & Ng, 2019, p. 288.

## Conclusion

This study identified wide-ranging barriers inside and outside of park boundaries, and highlighted the complicated context in which people, particularly seniors, with mobility impairments navigate their lives. The data indicates park managers will have the greatest impact on accessibility if they focus priorities on improving access routes between park features, parking, and accessible toilets in frontcountry areas near municipalities and alternative transportation networks where possible.

The study results emphasize some of the most impactful barriers are not within parks at all; they are tied to people's age, health status, sense of independence, and economic position. Park managers can use this survey to concentrate programming and partnership efforts with seniors' service providers and accessible programming organizations. These links with care and transportation networks, as well as in-park accessibility improvements will increase participation of people with disabilities and make parks better spaces for everybody.

The BC Parks Accessibility Survey shows us that including people living with disabilities in parks needs to be embedded into the fabric of an organization because the barriers span across so many elements of the park experience.





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