



How cities use parks to...

Promote Tourism

Executive Summary

Public parks are often the “engine” that drives tourism in many communities. In a simplified tourism model, visitors use some mode of transportation to leave their homes and travel to attractions, which are supported by various kinds of services, such as hotels/motels, restaurants, and retailing. The attractions and support services provide information and promote their offerings to target groups they have identified as potential visitors.

Attractions activate this tourism system. Rarely do people leave their homes and travel some distance because they want to stay in a particular hotel or dine at a particular restaurant in a different locale. Most of the time, the desire to go to a destination on a pleasure trip is stimulated by its attractions.

Many of these attractions are located in parks, while some parks are themselves attractions. This leads to the conclusion that in many communities, parks drive the tourism industry.

Key Point #1

Parks provide sites for special events and festivals that attract tourists.

Key Point #2

Parks provide sites for sports tournaments, which can be major sources of tourism and economic benefits, especially for smaller cities.

Key Point #3

Large urban parks with zoos, memorials, museums, cultural and heritage artifacts, and historical sites can attract tourists.

Key Point #4

Parks with landscape planting and design that are recognized as “living works of art” can be tourist attractions.

KEY POINT #1:

Parks are sites for special events and festivals that attract tourists.

Tourists are defined as visitors who come to a community from outside of it. In this context, they come specifically to visit a park or to engage in activities that take place in a park. Since the mid-1980s, there has been unprecedented growth in the number of festivals and events. Communities organize, host, and promote festivals and special events whose objectives frequently include attracting tourists. They are perceived to create a new form of tourism attraction, which is transient and flexible, so it can be used to extend or create a community's tourism season. Parks are frequently the location of choice for festivals and events because they are often centrally located, gathering places that are intended to facilitate recreation and can accommodate temporary infrastructure without major disruption of their normal functions.

When evaluating the tourism impact of festivals and events in parks, the following points should be considered:

1. Large numbers of participants and spectators do not necessarily equate to a large number of tourists. Most people at community festivals and events are from within the community. A mega-event is likely to attract more tourists to a community than multiple smaller events. Its attraction power is likely to stimulate interest from a much larger geographic area.
2. Many people from outside the community at these events are "casuals" and "time-switchers." "Casuals" are visitors who were already in the community, attracted by other features, visiting friends and relatives, or for other reasons. The event or festival was not the reason they came to the city. "Time-switchers" are visitors who had been planning a visit to the community for some time, but scheduled the timing of their visit to coincide with the event. In both cases, the tourism impact of these visitors on the community would have occurred without the event.
3. It is difficult to estimate the number of tourists at many festivals and events because they are not gated events and do not charge admission. Thus, total attendance counts, proportion of tourists to locals, and proportions of casuals and time-switchers are simply guesses, which may be wildly inaccurate. For example, a study of Fiesta San Antonio, which is comprised of multiple events that take place over a three-week period, many of them in parks, concluded the economic impact was \$16 million. If locals from within the city, casuals, and time-switchers were included, this would lead to the economic impact being wrongly inflated to \$136 million.

KEY POINT #2:

Parks provide sites for sports tournaments, which can be major sources of tourism and economic benefits, especially for smaller cities.

Consider the scenario in which a city hosts a junior soccer tournament. Twenty-four teams from out of town play in its parks over a weekend. The economic impact scenario of these tourists is likely to resemble the following:

- Each team has a squad of 15 players who are all supported by their families, so a total of 360 families (15 x 24) come to the community.
- They stay Friday and Saturday nights and return home late in the day on Sunday.
- On average each family spends \$300 in the community for accommodations, food, entertainment, and gas during the weekend, so total expenditure in the community from the tournament visitors is \$108,000 (360 families x \$300).

The tourism and economic impact of such tournaments is maximized when all teams/players in a tournament come from outside the community, and the number of nights they have to stay in the community is high. This exemplifies the retailing principle that the longer people remain in an area, the more they are likely to spend. Increasing visitors' average length of stay is the most efficient way to increase the impact of an event on a community.

In most cases, sports tournaments will generate a greater economic impact for local communities than special events and festivals, because most attendance at the latter (unless they are "mega-events") is likely to be from locals.

KEY POINT #3:

Large urban parks with zoos, memorials, museums, cultural and heritage artifacts, and historical sites can attract tourists

Cumulative attraction, an accepted principle in tourism development, says that a cluster of proximate facilities is likely to result in greater visitation. Cumulative attraction recognizes that much tourism business is shared. An attraction secures its visitors as a result of its own generative power and as a result of the generative power of proximate attractions. Clusters of recreational facilities offer a critical mass that is not present when facilities are widely scattered. As this critical mass becomes greater, people will travel from a more extensive geographical area to visit them, visitors will stay longer in the area, and they will spend more dollars.

Hermann Park in Houston attracts 5.5 million visitors each year. The original 410-acre park site was obtained from George Hermann's estate in 1914. George E. Kessler, one of America's greatest park designers, was retained to design it, and it was completed by 1933. Over the years a host of attractions were added either in the park or on its periphery, including the Houston Zoo; Garden Center and Botanical Garden; Houston Museum of Natural Science; Miller Outdoor Theater; Planetarium; Aquarium; various monuments; and the first desegregated golf course in Texas. The cumulative impact of these attractions, together with the beauty of Kessler's original park design, have made Hermann Park a primary destination for visitors to Houston.

Balboa Park, San Diego was developed on a 1,400-acre tract of land set aside for a public park by the city of San Diego in 1870. The park is renowned for its brilliant displays of seasonal flowers, shady groves of trees, and meandering paths. However, its ability to attract tourists today owes much to the legacy of the Panama-California Exposition of 1915–16, and the California International Exposition of 1935–36.

Balboa Park hosts 15 museums, which display internationally significant art treasures, exotic animal species, unique model railroads, world folk art, sports memorabilia, and rare aircraft. Many of the museums are housed in magnificent Spanish colonial revival buildings, originally constructed for the 1915–16 Exposition. Other attractions in the park include the San Diego Zoo; the Old Globe Theater; a sports complex with championship tennis courts, athletic fields, velodrome, and swimming pool; a golf course; Starlight Bowl; and an array of institutions that reflect San Diego's diversity, including the Centro Cultural de la Raza, the World Beat Center, the Japanese Friendship Garden, and the House of Pacific Relations. Balboa Park attracts more than 14 million visits a year.

In contrast to the cultural, historical and terrestrial focus of Balboa Park, **Mission Bay, San Diego** focuses on contemporary, sporting, and water-oriented activities. It covers 4,600 acres between Mission Beach, the San Diego Sports Arena, and Sea World. Approximately half the acreage is land, and its 27 miles of shoreline include 19 miles of sandy beaches with restrooms and shower facilities. The park offers a variety of landscapes and supports all types of boating activities including sailing, waterskiing, windsurfing, jetskiing, rowing, and swimming. Bicycle paths shared with hikers and inline skaters wind all around the bay.

KEY POINT #4:

Parks with landscape planting and design that are recognized as “living works of art” can be tourist attractions.

Prospect Park in Brooklyn is widely considered to be the finest park designed by Olmsted and Vaux. Within the boundaries of the 526-acre park are a variety of natural and planned landscapes. The principal features of their design are the Long Meadow, a heavily wooded area they called the Ravine, and a 60-acre lake.

The park became so dilapidated due to lack of maintenance that by 1984, attendance had fallen to a historically low 2 million visits a year. In the 1990s, more than \$100 million of private and city investment successfully renovated the park, restoring much of its original glory. Attendance rebounded to 6 million visits a year as Prospect Park again became one of the most popular attractions for tourists in New York City.

Golden Gate Park in San Francisco covers 1,013 acres. It is approximately three miles long and one-half mile wide. William Hammond Hall designed the park in 1870, but John McLaren, his successor as park superintendent, implemented the design. Hall, inspired by the Olmsted/Vaux design of Central Park in New York City, created a hilly park with a varying landscape of lakes, meadows, ridges, and winding roads. The park now contains more than one million trees, nine lakes, several fly-casting pools, and a lily pool within its borders.

In the east part of the park are The Conservatory of Flowers, a Victorian greenhouse built around 1880 modeled after the Palm House at Kew Garden in London; the Japanese Tea Garden, which covers five acres; and the M. H. DeYoung Museum, which has a diverse collection of fine art. These latter two attractions were legacies of the 1894 Midwinter International Exhibition. Other attractions in the park include the Buffalo Paddock; Planetarium; Asian Art Museum; Aquarium; and a 70-acre arboretum. The park's meadows are used extensively for picnicking. The attractions within Golden Gate add to its cumulative impact, but it is the inherent beauty of the park that mainly attracts its 12 million annual visitors.

Grant Park in Chicago is often referred to as Chicago's “front yard.” Renowned architect Daniel H. Burnham envisioned the 320-acre park as a formal landscape with museums and civic buildings. His geometric design borrows from the great parks of Europe. A series of bridges cross railroad tracks, and the park is divided into sections with public walkways, lawns, trees, and monuments. The park's centerpiece is the Clarence Buckingham Fountain, built in 1927, which is enhanced at night with a choreography of colored spotlights.

In 2004, the park was extended by 24.5 acres when **Millennium Park** was added to its northern border; constructed over active railroad beds. Millennium Park has quickly become a major Chicago attraction, with interactive public art, ice-skating, dining, and free classical music presentations by the Grant Park Orchestra and Chorus.

Resources

Crompton, John L. 1999. *Measuring the Economic Impact of Visitors to Sports Tournaments and Special Events*. Ashburn, Virginia: National Recreation and Park Association.

Hermann Park, Houston:
www.hermannpark.org

Balboa Park, San Diego:
www.sandiego.gov/park-and-recreation/parks/balboa/index.shtml

Mission Bay, San Diego:
www.sandiego.gov/park-and-recreation/parks/missionbay/index.shtml;
www.a-zsandiegobeaches.com/missionbay.htm

Prospect Park, Brooklyn, New York City:
www.prospectpark.org/hist/main.cfm?target=history

Golden Gate Park, San Francisco:
www.sfmuseum.org/hist2/ggpark.html

Grant Park, Chicago:
www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/index.cfm/fuseaction/parks.home.cfm

This briefing paper was written by John L. Crompton, Distinguished Professor of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University. Dr. Crompton's primary interests are in the areas of marketing and financing public leisure and tourism services. Questions regarding this briefing paper may be directed to him at jrcrompton@tamu.edu

City Parks Forum Briefing Papers

This is one in a continuing series of briefing papers on how cities can use parks to address urban challenges. We hope the information here helps you to create great urban parks in your city.

Please visit our website at www.planning.org/cpf to learn more about The City Parks Forum.



Copyright © 2005 by American Planning Association
122 S. Michigan Ave, Suite 1600, Chicago, IL 60603;
www.planning.org

Photo of the Pedestrian Bridge in Millennium Park, Chicago. Photo courtesy of Chicago Park District, Caroline O'Boyle.