

Report

Pennsylvania Governor's Outdoor Conference: Preserving Past Traditions, Creating New Connections

Contents:

Executive summary (page 2)

Detailed Report

Purpose (page 4)

Attendees (page 4)

Conference Proceedings:

Trends and driving forces behind the disconnect (page 5)

Impacts of the disconnect and changing demographics on PA and the nation (page 6)

Connecting the public and future generations (page 7)

Outlook (page 9)

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Executive Summary

Conference purpose

The purpose of the conference was to engage in an interactive dialogue with key stakeholders to examine and propose measures:

- to reverse observed trends of weakening bonds between the citizens of Pennsylvania and natural resources; and
- to find new ways of connecting people to nature.

The conference was convened by the governor of Pennsylvania, Governor Edward G. Rendall. The conference was held from the 18-20 March 2007, at the Penn Stater Hotel and Conference Center, at State College, Pennsylvania.

Conference participants came from areas as diverse as public health, tourism, the economy, childhood and family development, education and environmental conservation and stewardship. The business sections of the conference consisted of three panel discussions and three rounds each of nine simultaneous sessions.

Conference themes

The conference focused on three major topics:

- Driving forces and demographic trends affecting the public's connection to the outdoors in PA and across the nation.
Major driving forces include: lack of time--too many commitments; lack of awareness--how to and where to get outdoor experiences; fear of the unknown--what is out there, comfort zone; cultural limitations--lack of diversity and role models; and habitat fragmentation--urban sprawl. Demographic trends show decreased participation in outdoor activities across the general population and more so among youths; an aging and slowest growing white population; and fastest growing minority population.
- Impacts of changing demographics and loss of connection with the outdoors on the future of PA.
The major likely impacts of the disconnect and changing demographics included threats to: health and labor cost; life expectancies--increased risk of overweight-related diseases; jobs and funding for conservation; and revenue from taxes, retail sales and tourism.
- Measures to more strongly connect current and future generations with the outdoors.

Connecting current citizens who have low involvement with the outdoors and future generations would require a systematic concerted multi-stakeholder effort. These efforts will include school districts, the health and private sectors, state and national institutions, NGOs, and communities. Efforts should emphasize the health benefits of outdoor activities; clearly define efforts to introduce the youth and "first timers" to the outdoors; include outdoor activities in school curricula; creative and innovative outreach methods that focus on communities and community word of mouth initial communications.

Looking forward from the conference

There was a strong sense of commitment among participants including the governor. Major panelists were confident that trends can be reversed citing successes in restoration efforts as an example. Some members also cited early successes in states where reconnection programs are introduced. All through the conference, there was a strong emphasis on partnerships with researchers, the private sector, NGOs, state government, and the public necessary to reconnect and sustain trends in society-nature connections.

The governor, in his concluding remarks, pledged to make ample use of conference outcomes. He asked that conference recommendations be taken to county boards and other local units of government for improvement/adaptation, and development of action plans including time frames for the execution of those plans.

DETAILED REPORT

Purpose of Conference

The purpose of the conference was to engage in an interactive dialogue with key stakeholders to examine and propose measures:

- To reverse observed trends of weakening bonds between the citizens of Pennsylvania and natural resources, and
- Find new ways of people-nature connections

The conference was convened by the governor of Pennsylvania, Governor Edward G. Rendall. The conference was held from the 18-20 March 2007, at the Penn Stater Hotel and Conference Center, at State College, Pennsylvania.

Attendees

Participants came from all over the nation in areas as diverse as public health, the economy, childhood and family development, and environmental conservation and stewardship. Some key participants include:

- Governor Edward Rendall
- Dr. Sharon Larson, of the Geisinger Center for Health Research
- Richard Louv, Journalist/Author “Last Child in the Woods.”
- Professor Emeritus Geoffrey Godbey, Author/Editor of more than eight books and hundreds of research papers on outdoor recreation
- Michael DiBerardinis, Secretary, Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, PA
- Charles Jordan, Chair, The Conservation Fund; Director, Parks and Recreation, Portland, Oregon
- Michelle Barnes, VP of Outdoor Industry Foundation
- Mark Duda, Director, Responsive Management
- John Jakicic, Chair, Department of Health and Physical Activity, School of Education, University of Pittsburgh
- Audree Jones-Taylor, Director, City of Oakland, Office of Parks and Recreation
- Dr. Gary Green, Research Project Director, University of Georgia, Warnell School of Forestry & Natural Resources/USDA FS
- Larry Schweiger, President & CEO, National Wildlife Federation
- Caren Glotfelty, Director of Environment Program, The Heinz Endowments
- Dr. Nina Roberts, Project Director, Pacific Leadership Institute, San Francisco State University.
- Many representatives from universities, state agencies, NGOs and the private sector around the country

They were more than 400 participants at the conference.

Conference Proceedings

The business sections of the conference consisted of three panel discussions (Monday morning and afternoon, and Tuesday morning) and three rounds each of nine simultaneous sessions (Tuesday afternoon). The panel discussions focused on trends and driving forces affecting the public's connection to the outdoors in PA and across the nation; impacts of changing demographics and loss of connection with the outdoors on the future of PA; and measures to connect future generations and the public in general with the outdoors.

The Disconnect: Trends and Driving Forces

Major driving forces include: lack of time--too many commitments; lack of awareness--how to and where to get outdoor experiences; fear of the unknown--what is out there, comfort zone; cultural limitations--lack of diversity and role models; and habitat fragmentation--urban sprawl. Demographic trends show decreased participation in outdoor activities across the general population and more so among youths; an aging and least growing white population; and fastest growing minority population.

This panel discussion focused on facts about trends and driving forces affecting the public's connection to the outdoors both in PA and across the nation. The primary goal was to help policy makers, stakeholders and the general public understand the true challenges that must be addressed to enhance connection to the outdoors, and promote the natural resource stewardship in PA. The panel acknowledged that the trends are worrisome and complex. They examined changing user participation and leisure time preferences, shifting demographics, trends in development/land use, public health related to physical and outdoor activity, economic barriers and the current state of the outdoor industry. The following are facts raised by panel speakers:

- Youth participation in hunting dropped by 26% nationally between 1990-2000
- Hunting license sales in PA declined by 11% between 1995-2005
- Open space is disappearing due to development pressures; yet more recreation activities are being hosted on public lands; public land managers are struggling with who has rights to use the land and how
- Youth are the future of the recreation economy; what they like and would like to do outdoors are/will be different and we should be thinking about that
- The white population is slowly but steadily declining; 20% of all school kids are Hispanic; it makes political and stewardship sense to be minority inclusive in outdoor programming and management
- At school, kids have very little time for recess and play outdoors
- Since September 11, family recreation has increased
- 92% of kids who were raised in hunting families continue to do so
- Most recreationists are single; are we serving them?
- In PA, 90% of adults active in the outdoors were introduced before age 18
- Limited access; habitat fragmentation due to urban sprawl is reducing close to home recreation opportunities

- Kids no longer walk to school
- People are fishing less for food and hunting less for trophy but are doing these things more to be with family
- The experience economy is the way things are heading; trend has been fishing and hunting for food, then for trophy and catch and release to being with family and viewing/photography
- Outdoor recreation is the most cost efficient way to improve public health
- Research is not being translated into actionable knowledge; there is a disconnect between research and decision making
- Encouraging people to be more active, a preventive measure, is secondary to prescription medications
- A large nationwide study listed the following as the top eight barriers to outdoor recreation
 1. Lack of time; too many commitments
 2. Cultural limitations; lack of diversity, role models
 3. Fear of the unknown; what is out there; comfort zone
 4. Lack of awareness; how to and where to get outdoor experiences
 5. Funding for programs and publicity
 6. Negativity, particularly related to hunting
 7. Competition with technology and sedentary activities; TVs, gaming systems, computers
 8. Passive nature of society; youth are used to things coming to them
- The top three fastest growing outdoor activities are:
 1. Walking
 2. Family activities like picnicking
 3. Viewing/photographing wildlife

Impacts of Disconnect and Changing Demographics

The major likely impacts of the disconnect and changing demographics include: increased health and labor costs; shorter life expectancies--increased risk of overweight-related diseases; job losses and reduced funding for conservation; and decreased revenue from taxes, retail sales and tourism.

This panel session focused on the likely impacts of changing demographics and loss of connection with the outdoors on the future of PA. Panelists explored impacts on public health and childhood development; environmental impacts, particularly on PA's conservation and wildlife management programs; public access to open space; and the protection of PA's outdoor heritage. In summary the following facts were discussed by the panelists:

- The outdoors contribute 88 billions in tax revenues nationally
- 289 billions in retail sales
- 6.5 million jobs; these figures are threatened by the loss of connection with the outdoors

- 61% of PA adults were identified as overweight or obese; 35% of kids are at risk of being overweight or obese; public parks can give millions of Americans opportunities to be active
- This generation of kids might be the first the nation's history to die at ages younger than is currently the case, due to overweight and related diseases
- Increases in health cost and consequent cost of labor/insurance
- Insufficient revenues for natural resource management and conservation
- A study from the University of Montana showed that the number one reason why businesses relocate is the availability of recreational facilities/ opportunities; the economy of towns and cities are becoming increasingly linked with and threatened by the availability of these facilities/opportunities
- Kids who play in natural versus structured environments are more creative, become good leaders and are better at conflict resolution; these attributes are threatened
- Hunting and fishing license sales will not be able to sustain conservation efforts
- The concepts of hunting and conservation are intrinsically linked but not explicit to the general public
- Within hunters, there are too many small groups with different and sometimes conflicting interests

Connecting the Public and Future Generations

Connecting the public and future generations would require a systematic concerted multi-stakeholder effort. These efforts will include school districts, the health and private sectors, state and national institutions, NGOs, and communities. Efforts will include emphasizing the health benefits of outdoor activities; clearly defined efforts to introduce the youth and "first timers" to the outdoors; include outdoor activities in school curricula; creative and innovative outreach methods that focus on communities and word of mouth initial communications.

This panel session focused on connecting future generations and the public. Panelists examined successful programs, best practices, and new ideas to address key challenges addressed in the Monday sessions. New ways to reach out to and involve young people in the outdoors in a manner that they will understand and relate to. The following questions were addressed: What are the current successful programs that provide incentives and sustain youth involvement? What role can experiential education play? How can youth leadership programs in the outdoors affect their development and provide additional community benefits? How do needs and programs differ between urban and rural populations? In summary, the following were suggested to somewhat answer these questions:

- Taking the time to introduce the youth to the outdoors is necessary and will help sustain endured participation and stewardship; expose urban youth to outdoor activities in the community; engage youths in what would likely attract their interests; include youths in policy making and legislative processes like youth councils for the outdoors; eliminate barriers to student outdoor field trips by

- reaching parents and school districts; ask students about what they want to do and see in the outdoors; educate /encourage gym teachers to conduct outdoor activities like kayaking; use the outdoors as a learning laboratory early in the students' learning experience; the department of education to get involve; train staff in outdoor activities so that experience is good for everyone--staff/students; match urban school students with rural school students; create mentoring programs that match active outdoors students with less active outdoor students; match elementary with high school students in outdoor program activities; peer groups should be targeted because once they reach driving age, teenagers are more influenced by the peers than their parents regarding recreational choices
- Introduce the public to skills and experiences; we should make efforts to reach the first timers and ensure that their experience is memorable; empower students through organizations were they have a voice; outdoor need good PR about its conservation attributes; develop partnerships that help accomplish these missions
 - School curriculum should include outdoor and conservation activities; many success cases of state and NGOs' active engagement with school districts in helping to secure funding, schedule and execute outdoor activities with school kids of various ages were reported, examples: the hatchery program, wildlife boxes, hunter/trapper programs; PA governor's youth council for hunting, fishing, and conservation; the anglers' legacy and step outside mentoring programs
 - If we use the health concern/benefit message we will boost participation really fast; HMOs should be brought into these efforts
 - Develop state credentials for conservation like Tree Tender or native species conservation
 - Increase flexibility regarding access; public access programs should be more user-friendly; information is not reaching the targeted populations because of lack of segmentation; language and messages should be tailored to meet the needs of different profiles of users and potential users of the outdoors; outreach through churches, game boy and pet stores, schools, pod casts and AM radio; avoid negative information about environmental issues without emphasizing the need and hope for improvement opportunities
 - Team with minority programs in the community; improve minority labor force in the outdoor related programs and institutions; partner with local radio programs to promote outdoor activities; include a door-to-messaging initiative, communication experts say it is better than most outreach methods due to more trust; organize community and health related outdoor activities such as cancer backpacking/camping/fishing
 - Increase voiceless recreation such as creative interpretive signs; encourage both traditional as well and desired outdoor activities to match changing demographics
 - Embrace commercial interests and harness those to the benefits of the outdoor experience and conservation; many more businesses are interested in the environmentally friendly PR initiatives
 - Be ambitious and make outdoors central to lifestyle and culture, and provide creative programs like "soup and quilt hikes" for people who like soup and/or quilts; if people can relate to an aspect, they will give it a shot

- 70% of consumers say they tune out of ads on TV and do not read those on papers but instead they first hear about it from someone they know, then they search for more information through the media (TV, internet, radio), and then they make a purchase decision based on their judgment of how that may improve their lives; this is an opportunity to sell the health benefits of outdoor recreation through door-to-door initiatives
- Inspiration is more important to consumers than a great deal; marketing efforts should inform to engage and inspire
- Hunting outreach initiatives to focus on the link between hunting and conservation to help buffer the negative image of sports hunting
- Hunter-wildlife conflict resolution programs should be ongoing and more effective; efforts should be made to find common grounds among within-hunters interests groups

The goal of the simultaneous sessions were to review PA-based and nationwide best practices and new solutions, from across a range of stakeholders and issues areas; stimulate thought provoking interchange among attendees to promote interpersonal, professional and mental connections; document all interactions for use in later research and policy development activities; and build consensus around fact based solutions with proven results, and inspire creative thinking.

Outlook

Generally, there was strong sense of commitment among participants and major panelists were confident that trends can be reversed citing successes in restoration efforts as an example. Some members also cited early successes in states where programs have been introduced. All through the conference, there was a strong emphasis on the fact that no state agency, NGO or private organization could do these on their own. Partnerships with researchers, the private sector, NGOs, state government, and the public will be necessary to reverse and sustain these trends. Many also emphasize the need to make the explicit connection among the outdoors, human health, tourism, the economy, jobs, families and culture.

The governor in his concluding remarks said that this conference would not be one where after the fact people go back to business as usual. He stressed the point that the recommendations from various sectors of the conference will be taken to county boards and other local units of government. These boards and units will be tasked with improving and adapting these recommendations, development of action plans including time frames for the execution of action plans.