

Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks

November 25, 2019

**Re: OPHA's Response to the Ontario Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks Consultation Survey on Healthy Parks Healthy People**

Please find below the responses to the survey questionnaire created by the government for the consultation:

***Which of the following statements best describes you?***

*Public health stakeholder (for example, public health unit, non-government organization, non-profit health organization)*

***1. Prior to today, how aware were you of the link between human health and nature?***

*Very aware*

***2. Are you or your organization currently promoting nature as good for human health?***

*Yes*

***2b. Please tell us more about what you or your organization are doing to promote nature as good for human health.***

OPHA's mission is to provide leadership on issues affecting the public's health and strengthening the impact of people who are active in public and community health throughout Ontario. We achieve this in many ways including multidisciplinary networks and advocacy on healthy public policy. OPHA co-chairs EcoHealth Ontario and supports its shared vision of "an Ontario where everyone benefits from the provision of well-distributed and high quality greenspace, is aware of its contributions to health and wellbeing, and has access to its benefits." EcoHealth Ontario promotes the benefits of nature for human health through communication materials, an interactive website, and resources such as policy guidelines and business cases.

OPHA also supports local public health units on their mandate relating to promoting the "development of healthy built and natural environments that support health and mitigate existing and emerging risks, including the impacts of a changing climate".

In addition, OPHA has two volunteer expert workgroups that focus on this area. OPHA's Environmental Health Workgroup brings together professionals from various disciplines committed to influencing public policy, research and programs that address a range of environmental issues, including the benefits of nature in promoting health and well-being. Our Built Environment Workgroup promotes community design and land use planning, including the provision of parks to promote population health.

### ***3. How do you know if what you are doing to promote nature and health is successful?***

OPHA co-chairs EcoHealth Ontario and supports its shared vision of “an Ontario where everyone benefits from the provision of well-distributed and high quality greenspace, is aware of its contributions to health and wellbeing, and has access to its benefits.” EcoHealth works to empower professionals in a wide range of sectors who in turn engage directly with the public. One way we measure our success is to track “mutually reinforcing activities” of EcoHealth partners (presentations, publications, communications, research, etc.).

Members of the OPHA Environmental Health Workgroup were integral in ensuring that “natural environments” language was included in the Ontario Public Health Standards, 2018 (OPHS). The goal of the OPHS’ Healthy Environments standard is: *“To reduce exposure to health hazards and promote the development of healthy built and natural environments that support health and mitigate existing and emerging risks, including the impacts of a changing climate.”* Under this standard, local public health agencies are now required to engage in community and multisectoral collaboration with municipalities and other relevant partners to promote and effectively communicate about healthy built and natural environments.

### ***4. What are the barriers to using nature in health promotion and advocacy?***

Barriers to using nature in health promotion and advocacy include:

- Competing priorities when it comes to greenspace (e.g. land-use planning and development, recreational uses, health benefits)
- Challenge in quantifying the health benefits of nature across a broad range of impacts e.g. physical health, mental health, climate-related health impacts, health equity, etc.
- Limited research (e.g. systematic reviews, public health interventions) on the benefits of nature to human health, including the cumulative benefits.
- With limited resources, public health agencies often have to prioritize which health benefits they will focus on when promoting health benefits of nature.
- The risk of increasing existing health inequities if efforts are not made to identify and address these e.g. increasing neighbourhood greenspace could result in increased property values making it more difficult for families on low income to remain in those neighbourhoods.
- The risk that some people may lose out on all of the co-benefits green spaces provide for fear of the risks they may encounter. This barrier can be overcome by ensuring that health promotion messages addresses potential fears or perceived risks of spending time in nature. For example some people may be less inclined to use green space / parks for fear of acquiring Lyme Disease, and presence of ticks. Public health agencies are addressing this by ensuring that health promotion messaging speaks to health protection e.g. wearing protective clothing, checking for ticks, etc.

***5. What tools or resources would make it easier for you to promote nature as good for human health?***

- Access to research on health benefits of greenspace and nature
- Business cases on the benefits of greenspace (health, economic, social, environment)
- Examples of policies implemented at the local, provincial and federal level that promote nature and greenspace for health (e.g. local Official Plans, Ontario Public Health Standards, including whether these policies have been evaluated in terms of their implementation).
- Evidence and examples of effective and promising practices in communicating the benefits of greenspace for health

***6. Are there opportunities to incorporate nature into the work you do?***

*Yes*

***6b. Please tell us more about what you or your organization are doing to incorporate nature into the work you do.***

The OPHA Environmental Health Work Group has identified "healthy built and natural environments" as a priority area for our work. Other priority areas are climate change, air quality and water quality. When commenting on provincial legislation or developing health promotion materials we ensure we incorporate the message that nature and green space have multiple health benefits including cleaning our air, filtering groundwater, increasing resiliency to climate change, as well as promoting physical and mental health. We participate on the EcoHealth Ontario Steering Committee and subcommittees, bringing health evidence on these multiple co-benefits of protecting green space.

***7. Who do you believe are the key partners required to make health and nature programs successful?***

All levels of government, educational institutions, community and non-profit organizations, climate action coalitions, and health and environmental agencies can all have a role to play in ensuring successful health & nature programs. EcoHealth Ontario is comprised of partners from these sectors. OPHA encourages Ontario Parks to consult and work with these partners to leverage success in promoting the health benefits of nature: <https://www.ecohealthontario.ca/whos-involved>.

***8. What could parks organizations, such as Ontario Parks, do to position nature as a tool for improving human health?***

OPHA recommends that Ontario Parks link to organizations such as EcoHealth Ontario and OPHA who have developed some communication materials and tools to promote the multiple health benefits of nature. We are pleased to see that the Ontario Parks "Healthy Parks Healthy People" webpage identifies both physical and mental health and wellness benefits of nature.

OPHA also recommends that Ontario Parks place greater emphasis on the climate mitigating and climate adaptation benefits of nature for human health. While these benefits are often promoted as environmental benefits, they are foremost, human health benefits.

***9. What could Ontario Parks do to work with you and other health advocacy groups to promote the link between health and nature?***

OPHA would be pleased to work with Ontario Parks to integrate/promote the link between health and nature into our projects and programs including: OPHA’s health-focused climate communications campaign – MakeItBetter <https://makeitbetterontario.ca> ; revisions to the OPHA Position Paper on Human Health & Climate Change; and OPHA’s collaborative efforts through our involvement in EcoHealth Ontario.

OPHA also recommends that Ontario Parks engage the Ministry of Health and local public health agencies to identify opportunities and synergies to communicate the health benefits of nature, as outlined in the Ontario Public Health Standards – Healthy Environments program: “... *promote healthy natural and built environments, effectively communicate with the public by...adapting and/or supplementing national/provincial health communications strategies... addressing topics based on local need.. including.. natural environments.*”

OPHA is pleased to support Ontario Parks in these endeavours.

Of note, a number of health units across Ontario are identifying nature and health benefits and incorporating nature-based solutions in local climate and health vulnerability and adaptation assessments and built environment initiatives.

Health units across Ontario are also engaged in a variety of initiatives with community groups, schools, municipalities and conservation authorities that not only encourage greater connection with nature but also aim to restore and enhance greenspace to achieve human health benefits. Examples include: tree planting in priority neighbourhoods to mitigate heat island effect, schoolyard greening to increase shade and provide cool spaces, roadside vegetation planting to reduce air pollution and noise, and a range of active outdoor play programs such as Active for Life.

***10. Are you interested in engaging further with Ontario Parks on Healthy Parks Healthy People?***

*Yes*

***11. Do you have any other comments you would like to share with Ontario Parks about our Healthy Parks Healthy People program?***

OPHA appreciates the work that Ontario Parks is doing to promote greenspace for health. OPHA would like to see a greater emphasis on the health benefits of greenspace in terms of its capacity to increase resiliency to climate change, and to reduce exposures to contaminants in air, water and land. With a mandate to promote healthy environments, both natural and built, and to reduce exposure to health hazards, public health agencies across Ontario can be great allies in efforts to promote greenspace for health.