

Report on Park Stewardship

Free the Fern
Stewardship Society
2023

Prepared by
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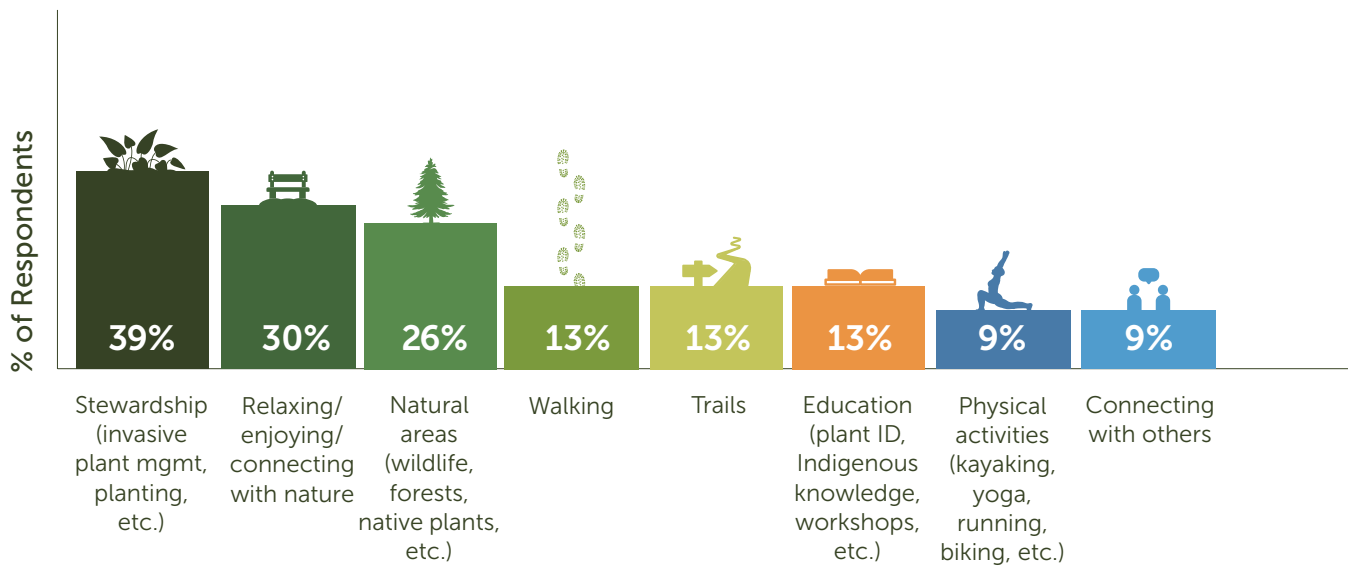
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Park Context

Free the Fern Stewardship Society is a nonprofit organization working in the Champlain Heights Trail system in Champlain Heights, South Vancouver, BC. The Champlain Heights Trail system is a network of stunning nature trails that wind through forests and natural green spaces, providing ample space and opportunities for visitors and residents to interact and connect with nature.

Previous Cornerstone research in 2022 found that a strong connection to nature was highly associated with better perceived mental and physical health and overall well-being. Therefore, as people feel more connected to nature, their health and well-being improve.

Places and Activities that Promote Nature Connectedness



Just as certain park qualities can encourage nature connectedness, there are spaces and activities in parks that can have the opposite effect. Our 2023 survey showed that spaces that inhibit nature connectedness are areas with a lack of trees and wildlife (33%), built environments such as sports facilities, playgrounds, and other structures (20%), and grey/paved spaces (20%).



Park Restoration and Stewardship Programs

Free the Fern Stewardship Society works to restore ecology by removing invasive plants and replanting native plants as well as promoting environmental stewardship through community engagement and education.

Champlain Heights Trail System Stewardship Impacts 2023

Metric	Quantity
Cubic metres of invasive species removed (volume)	34.556 m ³
Number of native trees, shrubs, and wildflowers planted	904
Number of people who participated in Cornerstone Parks initiatives	564 People
Number of stewards who volunteered in hands-on, park-based programming	336 People
Number of hours dedicated to stewardship and restoration activities	2,000 Hours

Free the Fern Stewardship Society Stewards

Free the Fern is made up of a network of volunteer stewards living in and around the Champlain Heights neighbourhood, with most of their members living adjacent to the Champlain Heights Trail system. From our surveys with stewards, we found that in 2023:

48% of surveyed stewards volunteer on a regular basis (6 or more times per year)

32% volunteer on an occasional basis (2-5 times per year)

28% of surveyed stewards were new to the program within the year

“Nothing inspires me more than to witness renewal and rebirth. It gives me hope and opens me up to being part of a community of care.”

- Free the Fern Volunteer





Photo: Elementary students help plant cedar trees.
Taken by: Free the Fern, 2023

“We often forget that we need to give back to Mother Earth. She provides so much for us. It is so amazing that you are giving back.”

- Indigenous performer at a Free the Fern planting event



Benefits from Stewardship

From our surveys, we also found that not only does the environment benefit from stewardship, but there are a host of benefits for stewards. The 2023 survey of the Free the Fern stewards found that:

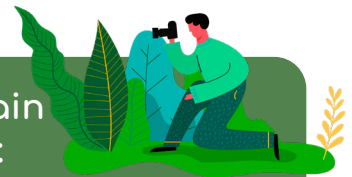
100% of stewards say that participating in stewardship contributes to feeling connected to nature and the environment

100% of stewards say that participating in stewardship contributes to feeling happy and satisfied

96% of stewards say that participating in stewardship activities contributes to their mental well-being (eg. they feel more relaxed and peaceful)

96% of stewards say that participating in stewardship contributes to staying in shape and getting physical exercise

When stewards were asked how they feel in the Champlain Heights Trail system, the most common responses were:



43% Connected (to nature/
community/self)

35% Peaceful/calm/
relaxed

17% Fulfilled/satisfied by the
work they've done



Photo: Wild Outside youth volunteers.
Taken by: Free the Fern, 2024

Pro-Environmental Behaviour of Stewards

Our 2023 survey results also indicate that those participating in stewardship activities often carry their experiences beyond the Champlain Heights Trails. They also engage in other pro-environmental behaviour, some of which are newly adopted and possibly inspired by their work with Free the Fern.

92% of stewards perform additional environmental actions at home (i.e. recycling/ composting, using less electricity)

88% of stewards have found ways to learn about environmental issues (i.e. read books, listen to podcasts, watch a documentary)

60% of stewards have encouraged friends or family to get involved in park stewardship since volunteering with Free the Fern

48% of stewards started conducting stewardship or conservation work at home and/or in their neighbourhood (i.e., planting native species, tending a garden, pulling invasive species) since volunteering

“The work has been carried out by an array of volunteers, across generations and backgrounds. Together we learn and relearn how to identify native and non-native plants. And together we reimagine this forest garden as a place of nourishment for human and plant life.”

- Free the Fern Volunteer



Fostering Inclusion in the Park

Cornerstone surveys conducted from 2021-2023 found that park users and stewards tend to identify as women, white, and able-bodied. However, Vancouver residents need to share access to high-quality, large urban parks equally. Therefore, Free the Fern is working to employ strategies to foster inclusion within the park and stewardship programs.

To increase inclusivity in the trail system and Free the Fern programs, Free the Fern has undertaken the following actions

Healing Forest: In 2023, the Douglas Fir Teaching Garden, which Free the Fern stewards, was designated as a Healing Forest by the David Suzuki Foundation. Healing Forests are places to acknowledge the history of this Indigenous land and provide a space of healing.



*Photo: Native Ferns in the Douglas Fir Teaching Garden
Taken by: Free the Fern, 2024*



*Photo: Cedar bracelet weaving with Rita Kompst of the Musqueam nation
Taken by: Free the Fern, 2024*

Indigenous cultural and creative programs: The Healing Forest involved a commitment to partnering with Indigenous knowledge-sharers and artists to offer workshops and artistic opportunities such as:

- Cedar weaving with Musqueam weaver Rita Kompst
- Native plant identification with Squamish educator Matthew Williams
- Healing salve making with Métis herbalist Lori Snyder
- A commission by Coast Salish artist Andrea Fritz to design a Free the Fern t-shirt, with funds from the sales of the shirts going to support the Urban Native Youth Association
- A commission by Squamish carver John Spence and his apprentice son, Koda, to create a sacred circle of carved cedars as seating in the Healing Forest
- A performance by the Coastal Wolf Pack, a multi-generational Coast Salish dancing and drumming group, to celebrate planting the Native Forest in October 2023

Native Food Forest: In 2023, 58 Free the Fern volunteers gathered to plant 764 native plants within the food forest, which is a self-sustaining agricultural system with native fruits, berries, and other edibles for the benefit of food insecure humans as well as wildlife, birds, and insects.

Appendix

A. What are Cornerstone Parks?

Cornerstone parks are rich in biodiversity, increase our cities' resilience to climate change, and for the millions of urban Canadians who visit them yearly, provide the deep connections to nature that people need to ensure their mental and physical well-being. These parks are stewarded and animated by communities to maintain and enhance the benefits these green spaces provide to society and the environment.

Cornerstone Parks is Canada's only national network dedicated to maximizing the impact and influence of Canada's large urban parks.

B. Methodology

Data was collected through surveys developed by Park People in collaboration with our Cornerstone Park partners. In 2023, 86 park stewards participating in programs with four of our Cornerstone partners were surveyed. These partners include; Meewasin Valley Authority, Saskatoon; Darlington Ecological Corridor, Montreal, Free the Fern Stewardship Society and Everett Crowley Park Committee, Vancouver.

The survey was designed for participants of park stewardship programs (activities related to caring for the land, i.e. invasive species removal, tree planting, and plant and wildlife inventory) and was conducted in the fall of 2023 through online surveys. This is the second iteration of the survey and previous research findings from our surveys in 2022 at our founding Cornerstone Parks can be found on our website.

The goal was to understand better the impacts that stewardship participants perceive on their well-being and behaviour.



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