

Report on Park Use and Stewardship

High Park Nature Centre

2021-2022

Prepared by Park People
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HIGH PARK  NATURE CENTRE



Findings at a Glance

1

High Park users tend to be predominantly white, highly educated and born in Canada.

2

As people feel more connected to nature, they experience better physical and mental health and overall well-being. Almost all (98%) High Park users feel connected to nature.

3

Participating in stewardship with the High Park Nature Centre contributes to happiness, life satisfaction, mental well-being and social connectedness.

4

The diversity of park users and stewards increased from 2021 to 2022 in terms of racial diversity and a greater representation of those not born in Canada.

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Park Context

A. Location of High Park

High Park is a 339-acre park in the West end of Toronto, ON. High Park is in a higher-income neighbourhood with a much higher median household income than the general Toronto population (106,000 compared to 83,000). Compared to the rest of Toronto, the area directly surrounding High Park has a higher proportion of single-family houses, with newer high-rise apartments along main roads. The neighbourhood has a predominantly white and Canada-born population with a lower proportion of visible minorities (34% vs 56%) and immigrants (40% vs 47%) than the rest of Toronto.*

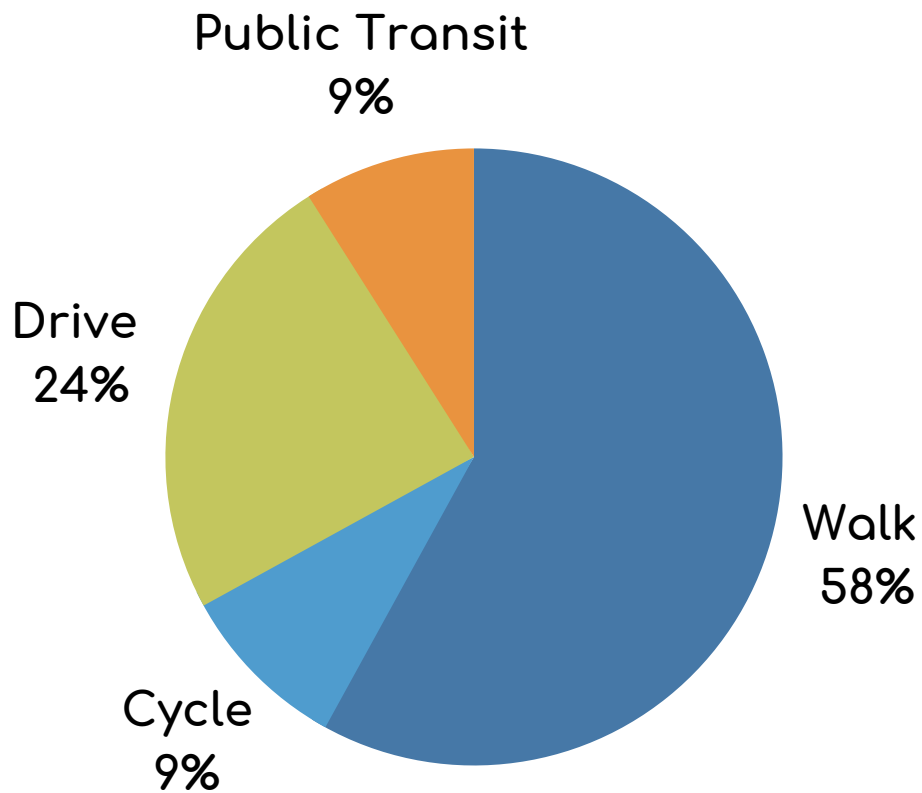


Photo Credit: High Park Nature Centre

*Data comes from the 2021 Census

B. Overview of High Park Users in 2022

Transportation modes of park users



70%

of park users identify as women.

83%

of park users identify as white.

17%

of park users identify as a visible minority, which is up 8% from park users surveyed in 2021.

74%

of park users have a Bachelor's degree or higher education.

C. Where Park Users Live

22%

of park users reside in the High Park-Swansea neighbourhood.

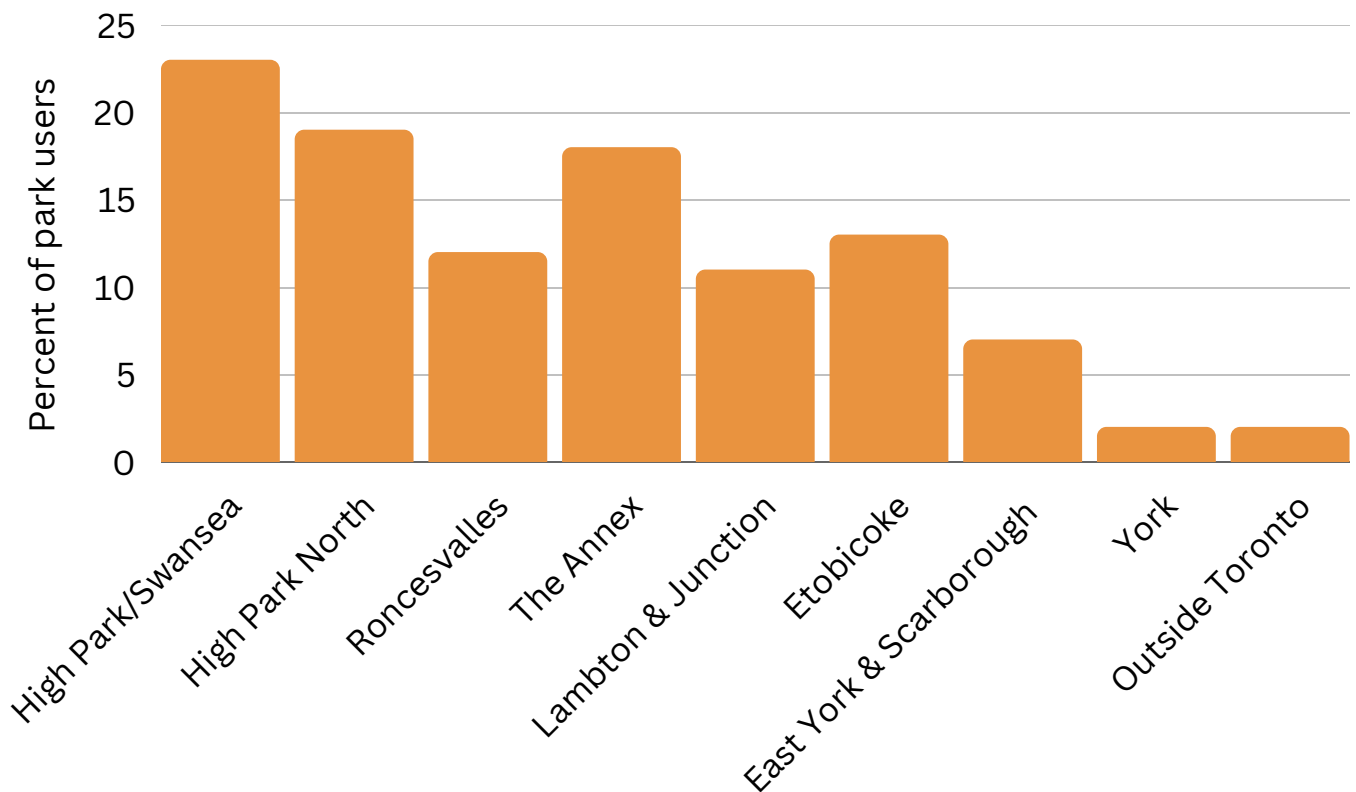
Only 4%

of users reside in East Toronto and the Beaches which is across the city from High Park.

Only 4%

of High Park users reside in South Parkdale and Stonegate-Queensway (two lower-income neighbourhoods) despite being adjacent to the High Park neighbourhood.

Neighbourhoods Where Park Users Live



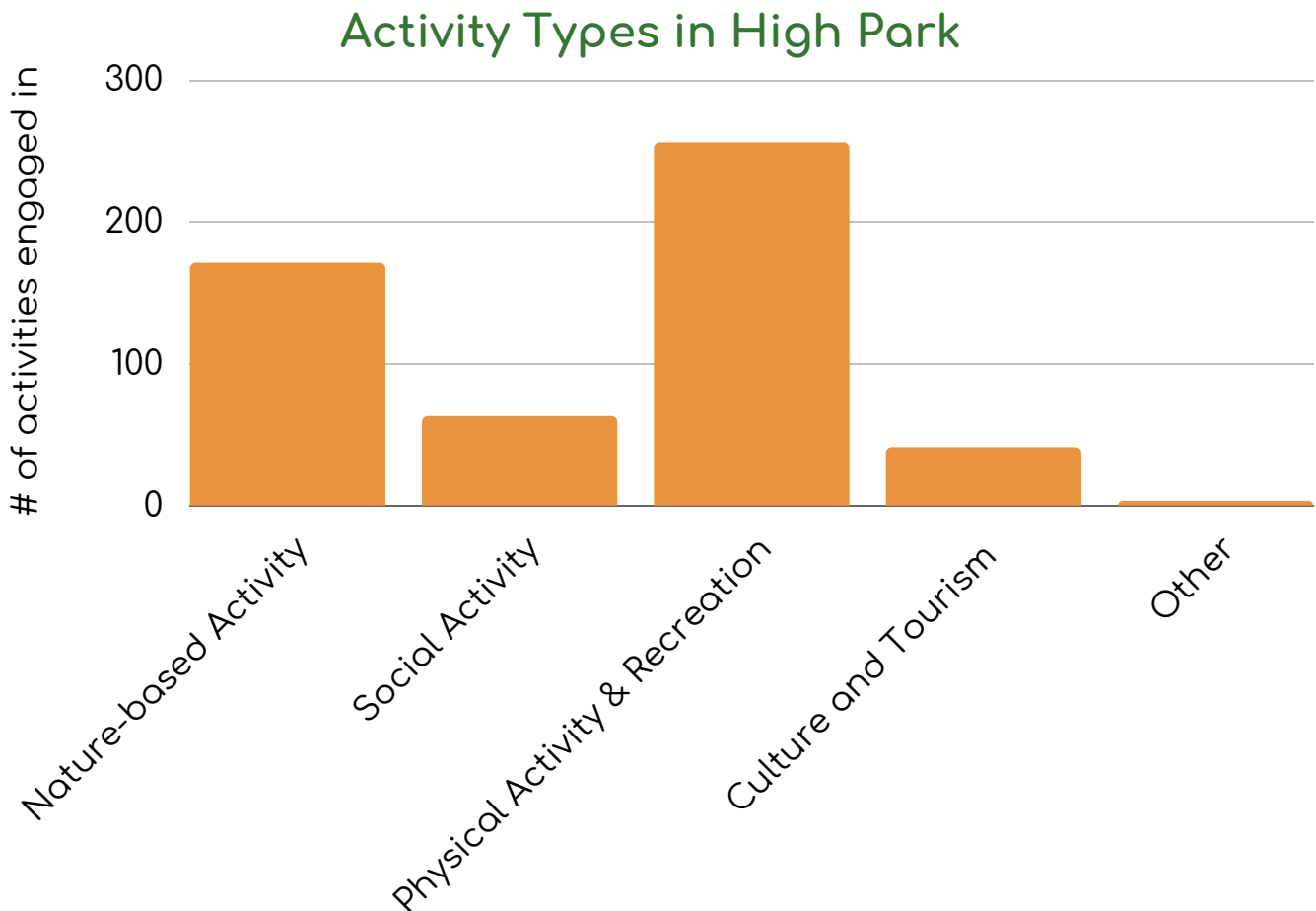
D. Activities in the Park

- The most common activities park users engage in are; walking on paved paths, manicured areas and natural areas, as well as socializing.
- In 2021, 92% of park users engage in one or more nature-based activities* on their last visit to High Park; this declined by 12% in 2022.

- 9% of park users participated in a program with the High Park Nature Centre.

Nature-based Activity includes:

- walking in a natural area,
- practicing a self-organized nature activity,
- tending to a garden and attending a nature program



Benefits from Park Use

From surveys of Cornerstone park users in 2022, it was found that there is a significant relationship between nature connectedness and mental health, physical health and overall well-being.

Therefore, as people feel more connected to nature, their health and well-being improve. From the surveys of High Park users, almost all of the respondents feel connected to nature on some level and, therefore, receive health benefits from their time spent within the park.

Park users who engage in nature-based activities feel even more connected to nature, suggesting that participation in nature activities at High Park may improve well-being and health.

A. Nature Connections in High Park

98%

of park users feel connected to nature on some level, where 76% feel strongly connected to nature, and 22% feel connected on some level.

Of those who report engaging in a nature-based activity, 82% feel strongly connected to nature, 6% higher than general park users.

"I have spent hours upon hours exploring the park, which has made me a better person."

High Park User 2022

Park Elements that Inhibit Nature Connections

43%

of park users say that cars make them feel least connected to nature.

15%

of park users say that bikes make them feel least connected to nature.

15%

of park users say that off-leash dogs and dog parks make them feel least connected to nature.

7%

of park users say that the High Park train makes them feel least connected to nature.

Park Elements that Foster Nature Connections

41%

of park users say that the place in the Park where they report feeling most connected to nature is the West Ravine Nature Trails.

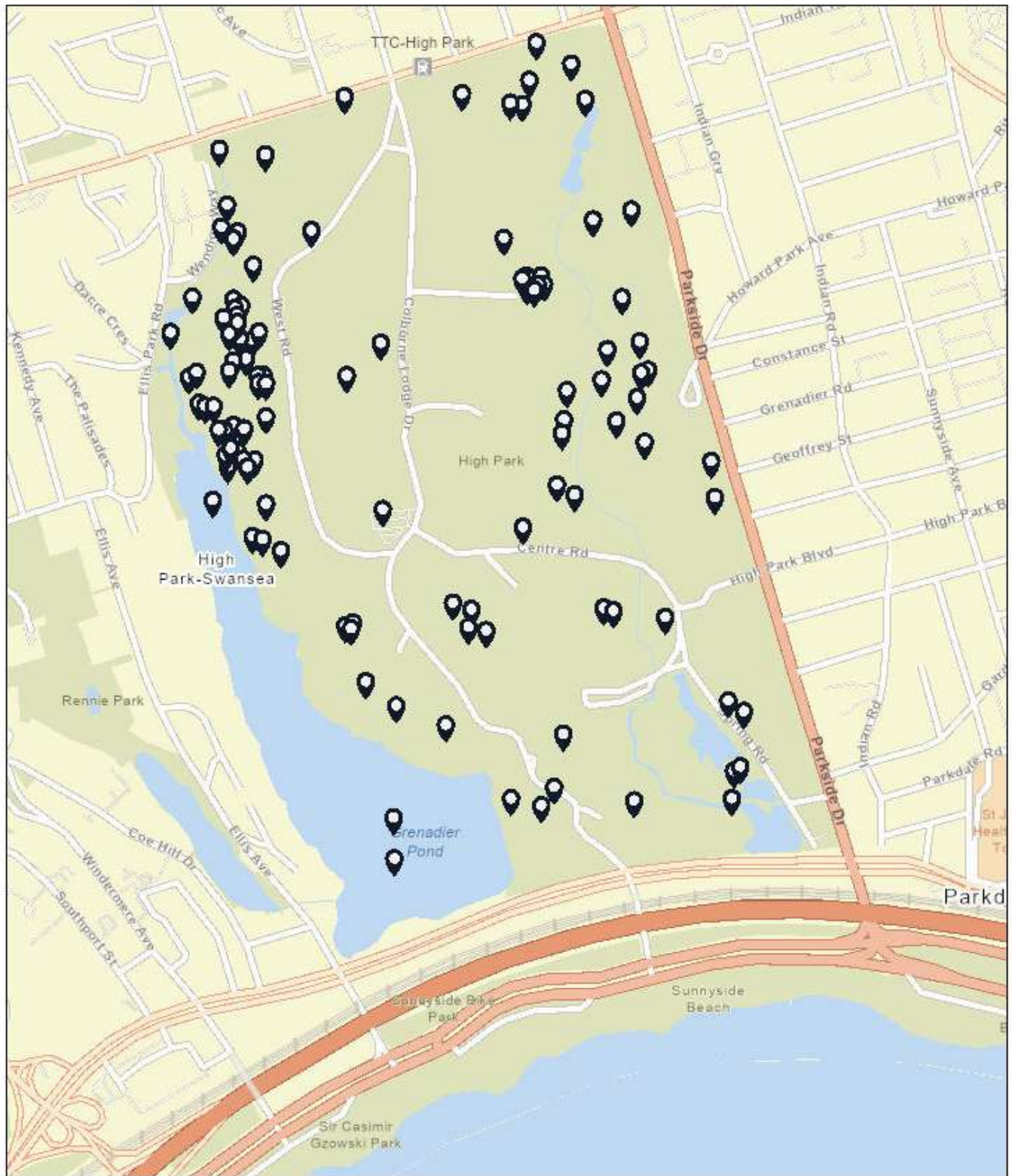
"I love High Park, especially the wilder parts in the woods."

High Park User 2022



Photo Credit: High Park Nature Centre

High Park Locations that Facilitate Nature Connections



B. Health Benefits of Visiting High Park

Those who report feeling strongly connected to nature rate their mental and physical health higher than overall park users.

58%

of park users who feel strongly connected to nature rate their mental health as Very Good or Excellent compared to 53% of park users who rank their mental health this way.

66%

of park users who feel strongly connected to nature rate their physical health as Very Good or Excellent compared to 48% of park users who rank their physical health this way.

“High Park is an essential part of my mental health. I go there at least once a week.”

High Park User 2022

58%

of High Park users say their mental health is Very Good or Excellent, which is 3% higher than the proportion of Torontonians in 2021 who feel this way about their mental health**.

85%

of park users feel cheerful or in good spirits for half the time or more since spending time in the park.

“Visiting the park is an important part of my mental well being”

High Park User 2022

** Reference: Toronto's Population Health Profile 2023

Park Restoration & Stewardship

High Park Nature Centre (HPNC) works to promote awareness and respect for nature through year-round, hands-on outdoor nature education and park stewardship. Stewardship is managed through staff and volunteer programs in the park.

A. High Park Ecological Improvements

	2021	2022	Total
Area of park space restored from invasive species removal	200m ²	563m ²	763m ²
# of native trees, shrubs, and wildflowers planted	1,800	2,432	4,232



B. High Park Nature Centre Volunteer Stewards

Much of the restoration done within High Park is conducted by volunteer stewards working with the High Park Nature Centre. From surveys with stewards and data collected by High Park Nature Centre, it was found that:

1200

volunteers engaged in HPNC stewardship programs in 2022.

2000+

volunteer hours were dedicated to park restoration with HPNC.

63%

of HPNC stewards in 2022 participate in stewardship activities on a regular basis, with the remaining stewards participating on a more occasional basis (19%) or when there is a special event (19%).

74% of stewards participate in stewardship activities 6 or more times per year.



Photo Credit: Ksenija Hotic, Park People, 2023

C. 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 High Park stewards.

100%

of stewards say that participating in stewardship contributes to their mental well-being.

96%

of stewards feel that participating in stewardship contributes to feeling connected to living things and the environment.

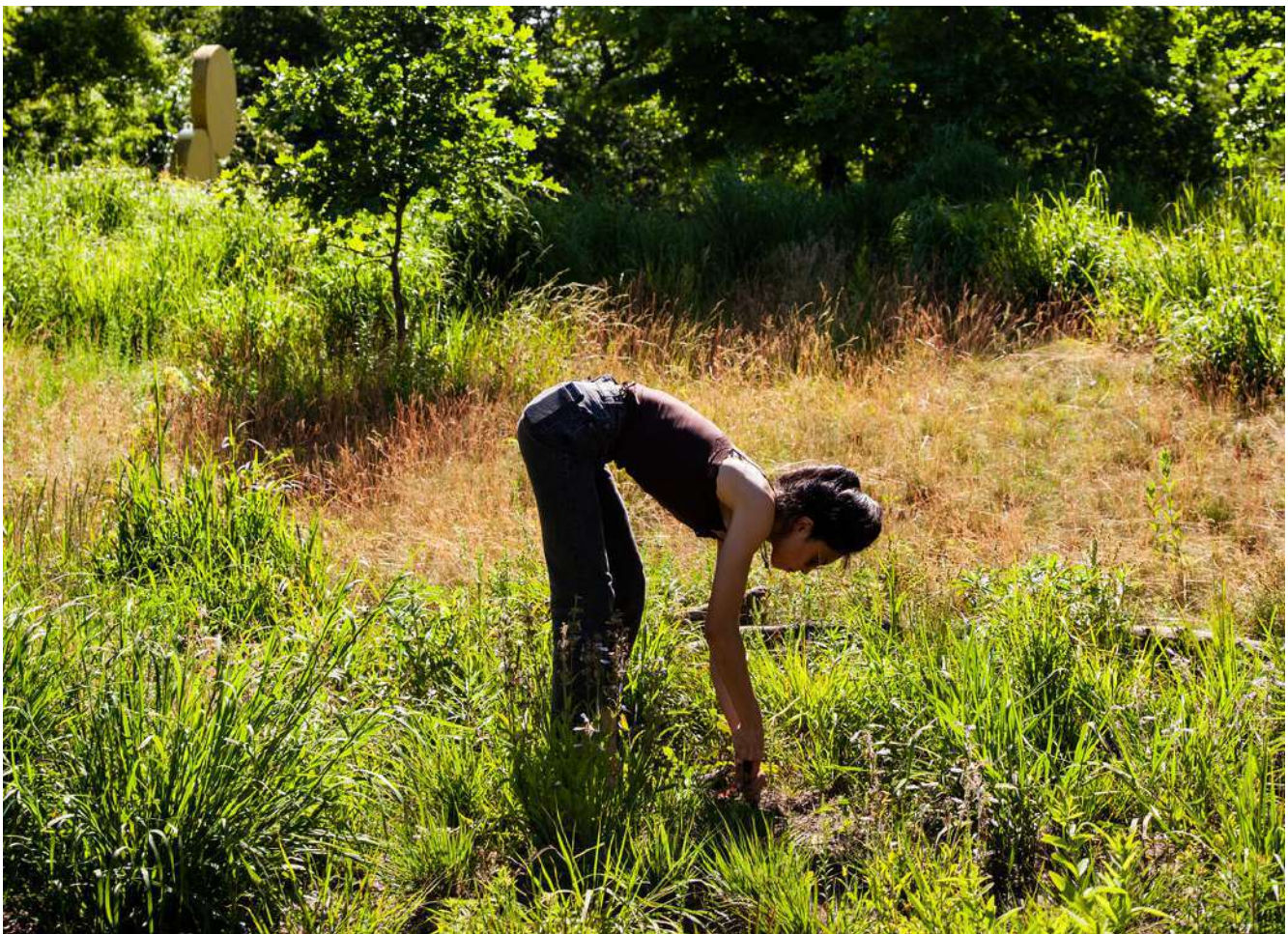


Photo Credit: Ksenija Hotic, Park People, 2023

Participating in stewardship activities contributes more strongly to health and well-being outcomes than general park recreation. The 2022 Survey of HPNC Stewards revealed that:

96%

of stewards agree that stewardship contributed to developing and maintaining social connections compared to participating in recreation activities (73%)

92%

of stewards agree that stewardship contributes to the sense of belonging to a community compared to participating in recreation activities (68%).

"I have found volunteering/stewardship deeply rewarding... I loved learning more about the natural world, and it helped me escape a period of depression brought on by the pandemic."

HPNC Volunteer

When stewards are asked how they feel in High Park, the most common responses are:

“Peaceful, Calm, Connected to nature and Refreshed”



Photo Credit: Ksenija Hotic, Park People, 2023

"My time in High Park is key to my wellness and happiness as well as to the health and happiness of my dog and kids."

HPNC Steward 2021

D. Pro-Environmental Behaviour in Stewards

Those participating in stewardship activities also engage in other pro-environmental behaviour, some of which are newly adopted and possibly inspired by their work with HPNC.

92%

of stewards say that they perform additional environmental actions at home.

68%

of stewards say they started teaching other people about environmental issues since being involved in stewardship.

"I cannot stress how impactful this program has been for me. It has had a ripple effect on my direct relations, as I share my knowledge and encourage others to connect with their local nature environments."

HPNC Steward 2021



Photo Credit: Ksenija Hotic, Park People

Fostering Inclusion in the Park

Access to high-quality, large urban parks is not shared equally among Toronto residents. Therefore, the HPNC is attempting to identify who is underrepresented both within the park and in stewardship programs to help inform strategies to foster inclusion. From surveys conducted in 2021 and 2022, we found that park users tended to be white, highly educated and able-bodied.

However, the diversity of park users seemed to increase between 2021 to 2022:

+15%

increase in those who identify as visible minorities from 2021 to 2022

+3%

increase in those who identify as gender fluid/gender queer/gender non-conforming/non-binary.

"My spouse is physically disabled, so High Park is the closest thing to the wilderness they can safely experience without us spending far more than we can afford to do other things. I can't tell you how important High Park is to us."

High Park User 2021

From 2021 to 2022, there also seemed to be an increase in representation from those not born in Canada in stewardship programs:

64%

of 2022 volunteers were born outside of Canada. Of those 64%, 19% have been in Canada for less than five years.

+34%

increase in volunteers who were not born in Canada.



Photo Credit: HPNC Stewards - High Park Nature Centre

To increase the inclusivity of High Park and HPNC programs, HPNC has undertaken the following actions:

- Developed the Branching Out Program: A naturalist mentorship course for fluent speakers of another language consists of sixteen hours of in-person training followed by a hike led in the participant's native language. (2022: Mandarin, Uighur, Hindi, Spanish, and Cantonese),
- Diversified their program partners, and
- Formed a strong partnership with the Indigenous-led organization: High Park Turtle Protectors.



Photo Credit: Ksenija Hotic, Park People, 2023

Appendix

What are Cornerstone Parks?

Cornerstone parks are rich in biodiversity, increase our cities' resilience to climate change, and provide the deep connections to nature that people need to ensure their mental and physical well-being to the millions of urban Canadians who visit them yearly. 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.

How was this data collected?

Park People conducted these surveys in collaboration with our Cornerstone Park partners: Stanley Park Ecology Society in Vancouver; High Park Nature Centre in Toronto; Les Amis de la montagne in Montréal.

One 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 online in 2021 and 2022.

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

The second survey was designed for general park visitors and was conducted in 2022 (and 2021 for High Park only). This survey aimed to better understand how people use the park and how connected users feel to nature.

Park People and external data consultants Spatialists completed data analysis.

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