Recreation Services in Aboriginal Communities:

Challenges, Opportunities and Approaches

Vicky Paraschak, University of Windsor

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Recreation Services in Aboriginal Communities: Challenges, Opportunities and Approaches

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Executive Summary

My reflections on recreation services in Aboriginal communities are shaped by three assumptions tied to the Strengths Perspective: 1) individuals, whatever their current situation, have demonstrated strengths in their behaviour/choices to this point, and so the beginning of any analysis is to identify those strengths, 2) all individuals have resources in their environment that can be identified and drawn upon to further develop their strengths and 3) individuals assisting the group under assessment will work with (rather than on) them as those individuals continue to build on their strengths.

Aboriginal strengths are discussed at the beginning of the report. They were drawn from Federal-Provincial/Territorial Ministers meetings and actions tied to sport, recreation and active living between 1980 and the present; two formal policies: the Maskwachees Declaration and Sport Canada’s Policy on Aboriginal Peoples’ Participation in Sport (SCAPPS); and a preliminary report from the 2008/10 First Nations Regional Health Survey. The two formal policies are resources that could become a strength for recreation development, although that potential has not yet been realized. A difference in cultural approach, between the holistic orientation of Aboriginal participants and government officials who separate sport, recreation and active living into distinct areas, is problematic, as it enables government efforts to focus on “sport” and “active living” while under-developing “recreation”.

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I recommend that we adopt the Strengths Perspective as our approach towards understanding and enhancing recreation for Aboriginal peoples and their communities. Aboriginal strengths tied to recreation, holistically understood, are documented in the *Maskwachees Declaration* and in national surveys. An ongoing commitment by federal, provincial and territorial government officials to enhance sport, recreation and active living for Aboriginal peoples is also a strength that has been formalized in SCAPPS. These and other strengths must become the basis for action. They should be supported and enhanced by governments who will actively embrace the holistic approach taken towards recreation, sport and active living, as expressed consistently by Aboriginal peoples and acknowledged in SCAPPS and the *Maskwachees Declaration*. Current efforts by government officials to enhance sport and active living should continue to be a part of Aboriginal recreation policy in order to further improve the sport experiences and health of Aboriginal participants. However, government efforts should also be expanded to facilitate “strengths-informed” programs and services for recreation and associated outcomes as outlined in the *National Recreation Statement*. To legitimize and optimize these efforts, program evaluation must occur, including attention to measures of well-being. Aboriginal strengths should also be tracked longitudinally along with the success (or not) of particular recreation programs, and all this information shared widely amongst Aboriginal practitioners. These actions, seen as a process as well as an outcome, will contribute towards recreation’s promise of enhanced well-being for all Aboriginal participants and their communities.

**Keywords:** Aboriginal peoples, recreation, strengths perspective
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Challenges, Opportunities and Approaches

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A Cherokee elder sitting with his Grandchildren told them: “In every life there is a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil: he is fear, anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment and deceit. The other is good: joy, serenity, humility, confidence, generosity, truth, gentleness and compassion.” A child asked: “Grandfather, which wolf will win?” The elder looked him in the eye and said: “The one you feed.”

I am honoured to be able to provide some reflections on recreation services in Aboriginal communities in Canada by commenting about challenges, opportunities and approaches that exist, as well as thoughts on possible future directions. I have learned in my work on Aboriginal sport and recreation that there are two very different ways to approach this topic. Too often, we begin our focus on the many challenges or barriers facing Aboriginal communities and Aboriginal peoples more generally then examine ways to address these barriers. This approach, called the “deficit perspective”, focuses on existing problems as a starting point. That information does provide a rationale for enhancing recreation services and a potential roadmap. However, those who criticize this approach suggest that it fosters victimization by always putting the focus on what’s not being done well, while inferring that “experts” must fix the problem for the individuals under examination.
The Strengths Perspective, which one could envision as the “Bright Side of the Road” (a song released by Van Morrison in 1979)\(^1\), encourages a very different approach. It fits very well with the definition of recreation found in the 1987 *National Recreation Statement* (p.6), which includes all those things that a person or group chooses to do in order to make their leisure time more interesting, more enjoyable and more personally satisfying so as to enhance social functioning, assist in individual and community development, and improve quality of life.

Inherent in this definition is the expectation that individuals “choose” to participate in order to achieve individual and community well-being – so an individual’s choices are central to what goes on. This focus on choice infers that remedial actions to enhance recreation will only be successful when taken up by the individuals making those choices, thus placing the participants’ actions at the centre of the analysis.

Three key elements of the Strengths Perspective have shaped my comments. First, this Perspective assumes that individuals, whatever their current situation, have demonstrated strengths in their behaviour/choices to this point, and so the beginning of any analysis is to identify those strengths. I accordingly start by discussing some currently existing strengths in support of recreation in Aboriginal communities. The second assumption is that all individuals have resources in their environment that can be identified and drawn upon to further develop their strengths. I thus frame these resources as opportunities to enhance recreation for Aboriginal communities. The final assumption is that individuals assisting the group under assessment will work with

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(rather than on) them as those individuals continue to build on their strengths. My comments on key public policy issues and promising strategic directions and initiatives thus are all premised on supporting and enhancing the Aboriginal strengths identified at the beginning of the report.

Current Strengths Linked to Recreation on Aboriginal Communities

Aboriginal participants, and both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal recreation professionals continue to confirm their commitment to enhancing opportunities for Aboriginal participants in sport, recreation and active living.

Aboriginal participants have consistently explained that they take a holistic approach towards all aspects of life, which includes understandings of Eurocanadian-constructed terms such as “sport”, “recreation” and “active living”. They also incorporate both Aboriginally-derived (i.e., traditional) and Eurocanadian-derived (i.e., mainstream) forms of physical and non-physical recreation practices into a repertoire of desirable leisure activities. Their participation then occurs in both All-Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal environments. This culturally-informed holistic approach has created some difficulty for non-Aboriginal professionals when they are reflecting on and facilitating activities for Aboriginal peoples as they largely operate from a mainstream, rather than an Aboriginally-aligned cultural framework.

Although Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples culturally construct their understanding of these activities differently, there have been concrete consequences to this difference in outlook. It has led to declared support for, but an under-development of “recreation” by government officials due to a more narrow focus on the “sport” needs of Aboriginal participants. In the same vein, there has been more recent interest shown
by governments in documenting and improving the physical activity patterns of
Aboriginal peoples, in light of health statistics (e.g., diabetes, obesity) that place them at
greater risk than other Canadians. Thus, attention given to Aboriginal involvement in
physical recreation (including sport) at the community level seems primarily intended to
prepare Aboriginal participants for eventual success in the mainstream sport system, or
to improve Aboriginal health. These objectives, while important and commendable, only
address select aspects of the National Recreation Statement’s definition for recreation,
which outlines enhanced social functioning, individual and community development, and
quality of life as the intended outcomes of enjoyable and satisfying recreation practices.

Whenever asked, Aboriginal peoples have consistently pointed out the holistic
approach they adopt. This culturally-aligned approach connects sport, recreation and
active living as related activities that, together, can enhance physical, mental, emotional
and spiritual well-being; this approach clearly aligns with the recreation outcomes noted
above. In contrast to this, Federal and Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for
Sport and Recreation (and their officials), for example in their biannual joint meetings²,
continue to state concern over both Aboriginal sport and recreation barriers while their
actions primarily address “sport”.

This pattern of separating and prioritizing sport over recreation has a long history.
For example, it can be seen in the press releases that followed Ministers meetings
beginning in 1980. In 1981, when provincial/territorial ministers discussed the need to
coordinate recreation opportunities for Native people (as the Native Sport and

² For ease in reading, I will refer to the Federal-Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Sport and
Recreation meeting at the “Ministers meeting”.

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Recreation Program had just been cancelled, the federal minister noted he would bring those concerns to the attention of his colleagues in Indian Affairs, thus abdicating any responsibility linked to his sport portfolio. Nothing more was said publicly about Aboriginal sport or recreation at the federal level until the 1990s.

Meanwhile, Aboriginal sport and recreation continued to develop with provincial and territorial, but not federal government support even though it has been argued that a treaty right to sport (holistically understood) may exist. In 1990 the first North American Indigenous Games (NAIG), conceived of and created by Aboriginal organizers, was held in Edmonton. This event became the cornerstone of an emerging Aboriginal sport system. Its international orientation and focus on mainstream sporting events fit more comfortably with Sport Canada’s “sport” mandate, and thus eventually became a focus for federal, as well as provincial/territorial attention and resources.

Two reports in the early 1990s reinforced the holistic approach traditionally taken by Aboriginal peoples, as opposed to the competitive nature of the Eurocanadian approach. New federal interest in addressing Aboriginal sport and recreation needs from an equity perspective were addressed structurally with the creation of the national

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3 To review this argument, which focuses on the medicine chest clause in Treaty Number 6 and a similar oral clause in Treaties 7, 8, 10 and 11, see Haslip, Susan and Edwards, Victoria. "Does Sport Belong in the Medicine Chest?" in North American Indigenous Games Research Symposium Proceedings, University of Manitoba, 2003: 37-48.

4 These reports were completed by Alwyn Morris (Minister's Task Force on Federal Sport Policy. "Sport: The Way Ahead", May 1992) and Neil Winther; Leanne Nazer-Bloom & Virginia Petch ("A Comprehensive Overview of Physical Activity and Recreation/Sport Relevant to Aboriginal Peoples in Canada", March 1995)
Aboriginal Sport Circle (ASC) in 1995. However, the three objectives of the ASC focused primarily on “sport” – coaching development, creating provincial/territorial affiliated organizations, and the NAIG. In 1997, the ASC presented a report that outlined barriers and strategies related to Aboriginal participation in sport at the Ministers meeting. Those in attendance committed to work with colleagues and Aboriginal organizations to further the participation of Aboriginal athletes in sport, and to explore how NAIG could be used for Aboriginal sport development.

Two years later, the Ministers agreed to pursue efforts linked to each of the ASC’s “sport” objectives, but also endorsed a Recreation Roundtable on Aboriginal Recreation and Physical Activity, in keeping with their interest in improving access to recreation and physical activity initiatives for Aboriginal peoples. This Roundtable produced the *Maskwachees Declaration*, which affirmed the holistic concepts of Aboriginal cultures, and their deep commitment “to improving the health, wellness, cultural survival and quality of life of Aboriginal/Indigenous Peoples, through physical activity, physical education, sport and recreation.” (p. 10)\(^5\) Existing strengths that support them in this endeavor were outlined, including “a physically active Aboriginal/Indigenous traditional lifestyle” (p. 10). Challenges were then outlined, including “the need to enhance communication and accountability between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sport and recreation organizations and governments” (p. 11). Various rationale were provided that resonate with the objectives of recreation, such as

\(^5\) The *Maskwachees Declaration* is included as Appendix B in *Sport Canada’s Policy on Aboriginal Peoples’ Participation in Sport*, May 2005, pp. 10-11.
provid[ing] personal development for success in life…inclusive opportunities for all ages and cultures to interact and to develop respect for each other…increas[ing] activity levels across the life span to improve quality of life…[and] provid[ing] opportunities for the family unit, including parents, to be involved in the development of children, youth and communities. (p. 11).

The Declaration ended by “call[ing] on all governments, non-governmental organizations, communities and individuals to endorse this Declaration.” (p. 11) It was an excellent resource for moving Aboriginal recreation forward; however most Aboriginal people were not made aware of its existence.

At the Ministers meeting in 2001, they agreed to conduct bi-annual reviews of federal-provincial/territorial Aboriginal “sport” initiatives and to monitor their status, as part of their commitment to increase the development of Aboriginal sport and recreation. The Canadian Sport Policy, released in 2002, included a commitment to increasing the participation of Aboriginal peoples and supporting the NAIG. In 2003 the Ministers committed financial support for the hosting of the NAIG, and agreed to address barriers to accessibility that hinder physical activity amongst Canadians, with a focus on less active groups including Aboriginal peoples. This focus on Aboriginal peoples was reiterated in 2004 in relation to their goal to increase physical activity by 10 percentage points by 2010, but not mentioned in 2006 when targets for children and youth, girls and women were mentioned. They did, however, talk about efforts to increase Aboriginal participation in the Canada Games and to develop a data collection strategy for measuring the participation of the Aboriginal population in “sport”.

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In May 2005, *Sport Canada’s Policy on Aboriginal Peoples’ Participation in Sport* (SCAPPS) was released. In this policy, the ongoing importance of games, play and sport in Aboriginal lifestyles was noted, along with

the holistic development of individuals, families and communities…this traditional Aboriginal perspective does not distinguish between sport, recreation, and physical activity; all of these activities are intertwined and integral to personal and community well-being. (p. 3)

The policy then declared that “a new, stronger collaboration among Aboriginal Peoples, the Canadian sport community and all levels of government is required.” (p. 3)

This policy is a resource that could strengthen recreation practices (holistically understood) for Aboriginal participants and communities. It declared that Sport Canada will develop and implement an Action Plan for the Policy…for the goals of the Canadian Sport Policy to be achieved, the specific values, barriers and realities of Aboriginal Peoples need to be identified and addressed…to create and maintain an inclusive Canadian sport system that supports Aboriginal participation in sport from playground to podium. (p. 8)

Unfortunately, an Action Plan was never publicly released. As a result, any evaluation of SCAPPS or the broader Canadian Sport Policy from an Aboriginal perspective must currently be completed minus a framework tied to objective evaluation measures.

Efforts by the Ministers after 2005 focused again on sport; Aboriginal involvement was enhanced in the Canada Games through an Aboriginal coach apprenticeship program, and a formal funding framework for the NAIG was created. Thus the ongoing promise of enhanced attention to “recreation” for Aboriginal peoples, formalized in the
Maskwachees Declaration and SCAPPS, remains an under-developed yet promising resource that could strengthen recreation in Aboriginal communities.

**National statistical surveys can provide insights on Aboriginal strengths related to recreation practices**

An ongoing concern expressed by Aboriginal delegates at recreation conferences, and by professionals working in this area, is the dearth of baseline date available. This information is needed as one starting point for understanding current conditions linked to recreation for Aboriginal participants. For example, at a 2009 conference in Edmonton, Janice Forsyth and I talked with Aboriginal delegates about the 2003 Canadian goal of increasing the level of physical activity in each province/territory by 10 percentage points by 2010. Delegates voiced that they were unaware of this goal, and that their communities did not have baseline data from which to work towards this goal.

Since Canadian-wide information about recreation practices on Aboriginal communities had not, to my knowledge, been generated by recreation professionals, I approached a statistics and data librarian at our university, Kristi Thompson, and together we examined various national surveys to see if they might be able to provide insights on potential strengths related to recreation in Aboriginal communities. I found that, with some expertise and creativity, quite a bit can be gleaned that can help us to think more carefully about this topic. However, each survey has its own limitations,
which are briefly discussed in Appendix A; thus, using data from several of them would be advisable.

In looking over various national surveys, the *First Nations Regional Health Survey* was found to be the most promising in terms of potential insights on Aboriginal communities. Current data is from Phase 2 (2008/10) and has been published in a preliminary report. The findings were drawn from 21,757 surveys collected from 216 First Nations communities in all provinces and territories except Nunavut, who declined to participate. This survey is under First Nations control in every aspect, which is a key strength in terms of First Nations governance over their lives and information. A Harvard review committee, assessing the Phase 1 survey (2002/3), found it technically rigorous, and also noted that

> Compared to … surveys of Indigenous people from around the world, …RHS was unique in First Nations ownership of the research process, its explicit incorporation of First Nations values into the research design and in the intensive collaborative engagement of First Nations people … at each stage of the research process. (cited in RHS 2011, p. 2)

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6 I would like to acknowledge Kristi Thompson, who scripted the discussion on the surveys and their limitations in Appendix A. This Appendix also includes a chart she created, which outlines relevant structural information about each of the national surveys we examined.

7 The major focus of this report is recreation on Aboriginal communities. Accordingly, I have placed the information gleaned on “strengths” tied to off-reserve Aboriginal peoples in Appendix B; I believe those “strengths” insights further enhance our understanding of the current situation for recreation amongst all Aboriginal peoples in Canada.
My discussion of strengths that could contribute to recreation in Aboriginal communities draws on data from that report\(^8\), which was divided into three sections: Adults (age 18 and over), youth (ages 12-17) and children (ages 3-11).

In the Adult section of the report, Table 7 provides a ranking of community strengths. More than 60% of respondents felt that family values were an asset of the community, followed by elders (42%) and traditional activities (38%). Many of the other identified strengths could also be drawn upon to create a viable recreation approach that builds on community strengths. Considerations might include an approach framed within family values that includes family-centred activities, encompasses traditional as well as Eurocanadian-derived activities, uses the natural environment, reinforces the community working together and provides opportunities for enhanced cultural awareness and First Nations language use. Rationale for the programs could include building on the community’s strengths, as listed above, but also addressing the list of challenges to community wellness identified in this survey (RHS Table 6). Benefits could thus include providing meaningful community-desired activities that might replace alcohol and drug use (the top challenge listed by 83% of respondents), proactively addressing health concerns (45%), promoting Aboriginal culture (42%), enhancing self-determination in the approach taken towards recreation (38%), and offering alternatives to gang activities (33%).

The number of respondents who felt their life was holistically balanced most of the time (physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually) was quite high at between 71-75% for each of the four dimensions; this could be seen as a strength in the outlook that

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\(^8\) The full report can be found at http://www.rhs-ers.ca/sites/default/files/RHSPrelimReport.pdf.
participants would bring to recreation activities. This finding reinforces the suitability of taking a holistic approach towards recreation activities rather than specifically focusing on just the physical, as often happens in non-Aboriginal recreation programs. About a third of the respondents noted experiencing racism over the past year (RHS Figure 19), which reinforces the need to be attentive to this issue when organizing recreation activities both on and off of Aboriginal communities.

Table 10 noted the percentage of respondents, broken down by gender, who participated in physical activities over the past year. The two most popular activities, walking (82%) and gardening/yardwork (35%) align with non-Aboriginal popular physical activities. Notable, however, are the various cultural activities cited, including fishing (32%), berry picking or other food gathering (28%), and hunting and gathering (22%), which reinforce earlier comments about community strengths in the area of traditional activities. There were also clear differences, by gender, for the physical activities noted in the results, which could be useful when planning recreation programs. Body mass index by gender was also reported (RHS Figure 22), with 24% of respondents in the “healthy” weight category. Female adults were more likely to be obese or morbidly obese in relation to First Nations males, which could provide additional information for gendered planning of recreation activities.

The survey also has statistics reported on tobacco and alcohol use, chronic health problems and diabetes. Given that this is a longitudinal survey, these factors could be compared over time in light of enhanced recreation programming and its impact on various challenges to well-being in the community.
In the Youth section of the report, a majority of respondents identified their general and mental health (RHS Figure 5) as excellent (30%) or very good (35%). The physical activity level of the youth was outlined by gender (RHS Figure 11), with boys (54%) more active than girls (39%), and over half considered active or moderately active (56%). Both physical activities (the most popular, in order, were walking, running/jogging, swimming, competitive/team sports and biking) and sedentary activities of youth were examined, including video games, which were significantly more likely to be played by boys than girls for over 1.5 hours in an average day (RHS Figure 12). Additional relevant questions included family structure, BMI and satisfaction with weight, and injury patterns. Most of the youths who were injured experienced injury while playing sport (59%) or participating in a hobby or leisure activity (25%)(RHS Figure 18). This supports attention being given to safety concerns during recreation (including sports) activities. Use of tobacco, cannabis and alcohol were all examined, by gender, as well as chronic health conditions; these statistics could be compared longitudinally in provinces/territories where efforts to enhance recreation opportunities for youth are implemented.

In the Children’s section of the report, the percentage of children in various BMI categories by age group was noted (RHS Figure 3), then compared by community size. Obesity increased as community size increased from below 300 people (33%), to medium size communities up to 1500 people (41%) to large communities (45%). The ability to examine patterns by community size would be useful when thinking about recreation, since community size can govern many factors such as the numbers of participants possible, and facility, services and equipment availability.
The physical activities carried out by children were recorded (RHS Figure 5), with walking, swimming, running/jogging and bicycling most popular for both boys and girls. A significantly greater number of 6-8 year olds were considered inactive as compared to their 9-11 year old peers (p. 88). Health status and chronic health conditions were recorded, with the large majority of care-givers rating the children’s health as excellent (56%) or very good (31%) (RHS Figure 9). Children experiencing behavioural and emotional problems were also reported by age and gender, with older children experiencing more problems but no difference by gender (RHS Figure 11). These factors, taken together, could be used to shape recreation programs - and desirable outcomes - by age and gender.

**Key Public Policy Issues**

**What is the best way to examine recreation in Aboriginal communities?**

The Strengths Perspective, as a process and outcome, works and sounds very different than a perspective that begins with barriers and challenges then seeks to remove or overcome them. It fits well with the outcomes tied to recreation, because it empowers individuals by initially focusing on their strengths, and supporting them as they participate in enjoyable and satisfying recreation activities that contribute towards personal and community well-being. Aboriginal peoples demonstrate multiple strengths, but those strengths are usually overshadowed by dire statistics so often associated with their lives. This Perspective also encourages both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal supporters to work *with* Aboriginal participants and organizers as they strengthen their skills in identifying and building upon current strengths. This approach ensures that recreation strategies will consistently be generated in conjunction with recreation users,
and promotes a participant-centred recreation system, comparable to the athlete-centred system that has been adopted for Canadian sport.

**How can Aboriginal peoples be assisted to optimize their recreation practices?**

In order for recreation practices to be optimized, Aboriginal understandings have to be at the heart of those practices. This begins with the adoption by everyone of a holistic approach towards sport, recreation and active living so that they are seen as linked rather than discrete activities that together contribute towards the physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being of Aboriginal participants. It is the separation of these activities that makes possible the prioritizing of sport and active living over recreation, resulting in an under-development of recreation practices and their objective of personal and community well-being.

To optimize recreation practices, they need to be grounded in Aboriginal strengths and legitimized through evaluation. These strengths have been identified in the Aboriginally-derived *Maskwachees Declaration*, and in the *First Nations Regional Health Survey* report. Frameworks for the evaluation of recreation policies and programs must be created and systematically applied to assess if recreation practices achieve the desired personal and community objectives. Ongoing identification and evaluation of strengths also needs to occur; the longitudinal RHS and other national surveys, as well as local community assessments could all be useful for this task.

To fully engage Aboriginal peoples in these processes, a national communications system needs to be created. This will ensure that the information being generated – about Aboriginal strengths, Policies and Declarations, Canadian-wide physical activity goals, recreation strategies that are/are not being successful in
Aboriginal communities, and research insights – is consistently made available to the Aboriginal participants and organizers who can both draw on and contribute to this knowledge base.

**Strategic Directions and Promising Initiatives**

**Adopt a Strengths Perspective for Aboriginal recreation**

This Perspective is desirable because it begins by focusing on the strengths linked to Aboriginal recreation, connects Aboriginal participants and administrators to resources that will help them further those strengths, and adopts an approach of working *with* the Aboriginal participants as they build on their strengths in order to foster personal and community well-being through recreation. Promising initiatives include the *First Nations Regional Health Survey*, which is already collecting information on Aboriginal strengths linked to personal and community well-being. The *Maskwachees Declaration* was also framed within a Strengths Perspective, and thus would be an excellent starting point for creating a national framework on Aboriginal recreation, holistically understood.

Research efforts that contribute towards an understanding of recreation on Aboriginal communities from a Strengths Perspective would also be valuable. For example, *From Practice to Praxis: Community Based Strategies for Aboriginal Youth Sport* describes the results of a community research project built upon

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...eight key principles deemed necessary for the development of a project that is both culturally and community appropriate: Partnership, empowerment, community control, mutual benefit, wholism, action, communication and respect.

...[Aboriginal peoples] feel that for research to be effective the solutions must come from within, merely aided or facilitated by external researchers (Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, [RCAP] 1996)(p. 53)\(^{10}\)

**Create and systematically use evaluation measures for recreation programs and policies**

Both national and community level evaluation measures are needed to effectively assess recreation programs and policies. For example, the *Maskwachees Declaration* and *SCAPPS* are both great potential resources for Aboriginal recreation, but that potential is not realized until these documents are translated from words into actions (i.e., an Action Plan) accompanied by a transparent, informative and user friendly evaluation process. Without these items in place, the policies can be continued – or curtailed – without evidence to back up that action. Aboriginal practitioners as well as those who provide resources are both better off with a well-developed evaluation process. One promising initiative is the *Active Canada Survey* currently being carried out in Canada. This survey is interested in gathering opinions on how much physical activity, wellness, culture and health matter in our communities, and Aboriginal peoples

will be included as part of the results, which will be presented to the Federal-Provincial/Territorial Ministers in February 2012.

Create a National Aboriginal Recreation Communications System

Aboriginal recreation participants, as well as those who service them, will benefit greatly by being able to access and widely share ideas about recreation on Aboriginal communities. A national communications system specific to Aboriginal recreation would enable both novel and well-tested cultural approaches and opportunities to be shared, and facilitate methods for servicing recreation that align with shared conditions. A promising initiative would be the LIN network, which provides this service for recreation information in general across Canada. Connecting a national Aboriginal recreation communication system to the existing LIN network and to the ASC and its various provincial and territorial organizations would be a useful starting point.

Connect with ongoing efforts elsewhere

Learning from and joining in with ongoing efforts that are related to the key concepts affecting Aboriginal recreation makes sense. For example, there are national health surveys that can contribute to knowledge, generally, about recreation on Aboriginal communities. It is useful to draw upon the data they are collecting that can be related to Aboriginal recreation issues, but it may also be cost-effective to get questions on these surveys that will further clarify recreation-related information on both patterns of behaviour and broader measures tied to Aboriginal individual and community well-being.

For example, the 2011 Canadian census has just been completed. If a post-census Aboriginal Peoples Survey is planned, then this is an optimal time to ask for
more questions to be included that can explore adult recreation patterns, as was done for Métis respondents in the 2006 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (see Appendix B for details).

We could learn more about how to understand and measure “well-being” from others as well. For example, Policy Horizons Canada released a Policy Brief in September 2011 examining the concept of well-being.11 In it, they point out that definitions need to include both an objective and a subjective (i.e., happiness) component. In one list of ten dimensions, “leisure”, “social participation” and “health” are listed. These items can all be linked to the National Recreation Statement definition of recreation. The Policy Brief notes that discussions on the concept of well-being, how it might be assessed, and what might drive well-being in Canada over the next 10-15 years will all be the subject of consultation. Recreation practitioners concerned about and/or working with Aboriginal communities need to become a part of this conversation to benefit from as well as contribute towards our overall understanding of well-being, a fundamental goal of recreation practices.

**Conclusion**

I recommend that we adopt the Strengths Perspective as our approach towards understanding and enhancing recreation for Aboriginal peoples and their communities. Aboriginal strengths tied to recreation, holistically understood, have been documented in the *Maskwachees Declaration* and in national surveys. An ongoing commitment by federal, provincial and territorial government officials to enhance sport, recreation and

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11 This Policy Brief by David Hay, titled What is Well-Being?, can be access at http://www.horizons.gc.ca/page.asp?pagenm=2011-0086_01&langcd=E
active living for Aboriginal peoples is a strength that has been formalized in policy through SCAPPS. These and other strengths must become the basis for action. They should be supported and enhanced by governments who will actively embrace the holistic approach taken towards recreation, sport and active living, as expressed consistently by Aboriginal peoples and acknowledged in SCAPPS and the Maskwachees Declaration. Current efforts by government officials to enhance sport and active living should continue to be a part of Aboriginal recreation policy in order to further improve the sport experiences and health of Aboriginal participants. However, government efforts should also be expanded to facilitate “strengths-informed” programs and services for recreation and associated outcomes – enhanced social functioning, individual and community development, and improved quality of life – as outlined in the National Recreation Statement. To legitimize and optimize these efforts, program evaluation must occur, including attention to subjective and objective measures of well-being. Aboriginal strengths should also be tracked longitudinally along with the success (or not) of particular recreation programs, and all this information shared widely amongst Aboriginal recreation practitioners and their allies. These actions, seen as a process as well as an outcome, will contribute towards recreation’s promise of enhanced well-being for all Aboriginal participants and their communities.

Allies include Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal supporters who actively facilitate Aboriginal efforts to enhance recreation practices, such as government officials, Aboriginal organizations, non-government organizations and researchers.
## Appendix A: Information on National Surveys Examined

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Sample characteristics</th>
<th>Aboriginal identifiers</th>
<th>Geography/reservation status</th>
<th>Has data on</th>
<th>Available for reanalysis?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006 Census</td>
<td>All of Canada</td>
<td>Aboriginal Ancestry, Status Indian, Aboriginal Identity: First Nations, Metis, Inuit, other; Band membership</td>
<td>Very detailed; includes on/off reserve in published tables and restricted-access version</td>
<td>Basic demographics only</td>
<td>Public-use version available for download; full data through RDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 Aboriginal People’s survey &amp; Aboriginal Children’s survey</td>
<td>Survey of people giving an Aboriginal identity in the census; off-reserve only</td>
<td>Same as census</td>
<td>Covers off-reserve only. CMA, urban, rural, arctic</td>
<td>Demographics, health conditions, education, work; for children, recreation including hours of sports per week</td>
<td>Public-use version available for download; full data through RDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008 General Social Survey</td>
<td>Random digit dialing survey of Canadian population</td>
<td>Aboriginal identity only – no subcategories</td>
<td>CMA, urban, rural. On-reserve aboriginals may be included, cannot be identified</td>
<td>Social networks, civic engagement, family and community</td>
<td>Public-use version available for download; full data through RDC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Nations Regional Health Survey phase 2 2008-10</td>
<td>Conducted in 216 First Nations communities, Nunavut not included</td>
<td>First Nations community (reserve) in raw data – no off-reserve coverage</td>
<td>Community wellness, personal wellness, physical activity and nutrition. For children, mental and social well-being</td>
<td>At present only published reports are available</td>
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For data on the Aboriginal population of Canada (as for the rest of the Canadian population), the traditional source is Statistics Canada. Statistics Canada collects data through the census as well as through a number of large scale health, education and employment surveys. Statistics Canada also conducts two post-census surveys specifically of Aboriginal people, the Aboriginal Peoples’ Survey and the Aboriginal Children’s survey (data from the latest of these, in 2006, covers only the off-reserve population). There are particular challenges with collecting data on the Aboriginal population. In general, the Aboriginal population is small relative to the overall population of Canada, so unless a survey specifically targets the Aboriginal population, generally there will only be enough Aboriginal respondents to draw conclusions on in the largest surveys. A second problem is that Aboriginal communities, particularly on-reserve communities, are specifically not included in some data. Even the census, which in theory should reach every person in Canada, has so far been unable to fully enumerate the Aboriginal population: “on some Indian reserves and Indian settlements in the 2006 Census, enumeration was not permitted or was interrupted before it could be completed.”\(^\text{13}\) This is an ongoing problem with deep historical and political roots. (see for example Ethics of Aboriginal Research\(^\text{14}\), Aboriginal Census Data In Canada: a Research Note\(^\text{15}\))

An alternative source for data on Aboriginal communities is data collected under the governance of First Nations themselves. The First Nations Regional Health Survey

\(^{13}\) http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/2006/ref/notes/aboriginal-autochtones-eng.cfm

\(^{14}\) http://www.indigenous.ca/docs/ethics%20of%20aboriginal%20research.pdf

\(^{15}\) http://www.brandonu.ca/Library/cjns/19.2/cjnsv19no2_pg365-379.pdf
(commonly abbreviated to RHS) “is the only First Nations governed, national health survey in Canada,”\(^{16}\) carried out with funding from Health Canada to help address gaps in the data collected on the Aboriginal population. As a community-based survey, this is a particularly good source for data on the on-reserve population. However, because it is a First Nations community survey, Aboriginals not living in identified First Nations communities are excluded. As well, Nunavut communities have opted not to participate in the last two surveys.

Statistics Canada measures the Aboriginal population in Canada in 3 different ways:

- Aboriginal *ancestry* (ethnic origin census variable) (population 1,678,235)
- Aboriginal *identity* (population 1,172,790)
- Registered Indian Status (population 623,780)

Both Aboriginal Ancestry and Aboriginal Identity include subcategories of North American Indian (or First Nations), Métis, and Inuit. Registered Indian Status excludes Métis and Inuit, and is primarily an administrative category. Aboriginal *identity* means that the person considers him/herself to have an Aboriginal identity. Aboriginal *ancestry* means that the person listed an Aboriginal group as one of his/her ethnic origins in response to the census “ethnic origin” question. We decided, when using Statistics Canada data, to use the Aboriginal identity variable, as this category allows respondents to define themselves, and in addition it is often the only variable available.

In some large-scale population surveys (such as the Statistics Canada General Social

\(^{16}\) http://www.rhs-ers.ca/
Survey) the Aboriginal population on and off-reserve is included in the survey (though there may be some non-response bias) and can be identified by an “Aboriginal identity” variable.

While the purpose of this report is to discuss recreation in Aboriginal communities, we felt it was important not to neglect the off-reserve population – because of its size, if nothing else. “According to 2006 Census data, off-reserve Aboriginal people constitute the fastest growing segment of Canadian Society. In 2006 a full 56% of Aboriginal people lived in urban areas, up from 50% in 1996. The cities with the largest Aboriginal populations were Winnipeg (68,380), Edmonton (52,100), Vancouver (40,310), Toronto (26,575), Calgary (26,575), Saskatoon (21,535), and Regina (17,105).”

Of the 1,172,790 aboriginal identity population in Canada, 308,490 (26%) live on reserves, 240,825 (20.5%) in other rural communities, and 623,470 (53%) in urban areas. 34,375 who do not hold an aboriginal identity also live on reserves. 698,025 (59.5%) gave a North American Indian identity, 389,780 (33.2%) Métis, 50,480 (4.3%) Inuit, 7,740 (0.66%) multiple identities, and 26,760 (2.3%) gave “other” or did not specify. Based on these statistics, it seems clear to us that data from several surveys would be needed to create an inclusive picture of recreation for Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

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17 http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/eng/1100100014265/1100100014269

18 Statistics Canada topic-based tabulation, 97-558-XCB2006015
Appendix B: Recreation Strengths tied to Off-Reserve Aboriginal Peoples

Statistical information related to recreation strengths in Aboriginal communities could also be gleaned from the 2006 *Aboriginal Peoples Survey*. These respondents, randomly chosen from individuals who had declared Aboriginal identity in the 2006 census, were from off-reserve locations (as opposed to the RHS focus on Aboriginal communities). Some questions were answered by all respondents, some by Arctic respondents (which would address individuals in Nunavut missing from the RHS) and some by Métis respondents (who were not included in the RHS). There were two components to the survey: children and youth off-reserve (ages 6-14) and adults off-reserve (age 15 and older).

The only Adult survey question for all respondents that potentially addressed recreation strengths asked about various traditional practices (e.g., gathering wild plants, trapping, fishing). For example, if they agreed to having gathered wild plants, then they were asked if they had done so in the past 12 months. If they had, those individuals were asked if they gathered wild plants for pleasure, which fits with a recreational orientation towards traditional activities. An SPSS analysis identified that 62.1% of respondents had gathered wild plants; of those individuals, 55.8% had done so in the past 12 months; of those individuals, 69.4% had done so for pleasure, supporting the strength identified in the RHS adult data about the importance of cultural activities, but also tying it through “pleasure” to our definition of recreation.

The adult data also had questions specific to Arctic respondents. Relevant questions included if they’d attended or participated in a local sports event in the last 12...
months (41% had); their satisfaction with recreational facilities (69% were somewhat or very satisfied with them); their satisfaction with life in their community (92% were somewhat or very satisfied); and their ties to family members living in their community in another household (on a 5 point scale, 42% answered 5 or very strong). These responses provide insight on local sports engagement, but also on facilities needed for recreation and two strengths that could potentially be tied to recreation – social networks and community well-being.

There were many questions related to recreation solely answered by Métis respondents. Using SPSS analysis, only 25% were a member of any voluntary club. There were a large number of questions asking about their involvement in a variety of recreation/sport activities. For example, in the past year, 89% had gone for a walk for exercise, 41% had gone berry picking and 30% had played competitive sport, showing a range of types of activities that could be included in recreation programs. While 13% did no physical activity, the greatest response to hours per week doing physical activity was 37% (1-2 hours); the number of responses then decreased as the number of hours per week increased. 75% believed there was something they could do to improve their physical health; for that group, the top response on the most important thing you could do was to “increase exercise” at 57%. This would seem to be an ideal potential benefit, therefore, for motivating Métis participants to engage in physical recreation activities. These Métis-specific questions, combined with those from the Arctic respondents, would have enhanced our understanding of Aboriginal participants broadly if they had been answered by all the respondents of this survey.
The children and youth portion of the survey also had questions related to recreation patterns. Using SPSS analysis, 47.5% had played sports, including taking lessons, 1-3 times per week. Comparing this frequency of engagement (1-3 times per week) across other questions, the data showed that 29% had taken art or music lessons; 28% had taken part in clubs or groups; 23% had volunteered in the community or school; 13% had participated in cultural activities and 26% had spent time with elders. This pattern suggests that sports remain most popular, but other recreational activities beyond sport are being pursued and could be potentially enhanced. Hours per day playing video games was also measured. This data for off-reserve youth aligned with the RHS findings; boys were much more likely to spend time playing than girls. For example, 52% of boys played an hour per day of video games as compared to 27% of girls. This database for children and youth could be broken down by age and gender, thus enabling recreation professionals to think more carefully about the patterns that exist, and ways to longitudinally track those patterns as recreation programs are strategically created and offered.

The final national survey examined was the General Social Survey (2008), which focused on social networks, and social and civic participation. Households were selected using random digit dialing, and one question was “Are you an Aboriginal person, that is, North American Indian, Métis or Inuit?” The data can thus be analysed, using SPSS, based on their response to this question, which allows for a comparison to be made between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents. However, the data does not specify where the Aboriginal respondents live in Canada (i.e., on or off-reserve), and only the ten provinces were surveyed. Specific to this survey, three questions seemed
to fit with our focus on the strengths of recreation in Aboriginal communities. First, respondents were asked if, in the past year, they were a member or participant in a sports or recreational organization. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal responses in the affirmative were comparable (29.5%). When asked if they were a member or participant in a cultural, educational or hobby organization in the past year, Aboriginal responses outnumbered those of non-Aboriginal people (22.1% vs. 20%). Finally, when asked if, in the past 12 months, they had done unpaid volunteer work for an organization, Aboriginal responses were higher once again (45.1% vs. 41%). These questions, taken together, certainly suggest that Aboriginal engagement in organizations contributing to recreation are comparable to or higher than non-Aboriginal individuals, which can be seen as a strength in the Aboriginal community tied to recreation.