

## Connecting People to Parks through Outdoor Play

**Fran Mainella**, Visiting Scholar, Clemson University in the Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management Department, Co-Chair, US Play Coalition, 16th Director of the National Park Service, 128 McGinty Court, 263 Lehotsky Hall, Clemson, SC 29634; [fmainel@clemson.edu](mailto:fmainel@clemson.edu)

**Carly Summers**, Executive Director, US Play Coalition, 128 McGinty Court, 263 Lehotsky Hall, Clemson, SC 29634; [csummer@g.clemson.edu](mailto:csummer@g.clemson.edu)

*[Ed. note: The format for this session was a café conversation, with a brief introductory presentation, followed by time for sharing and discussion with participants.]*

### Connecting people to parks

WHEN THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE (NPS) RELEASED “A CALL TO ACTION” IN 2011, one of the four major themes was “Connecting people to parks.” As components of this theme, the NPS identified four goals it must achieve:

1. Develop and nurture lifelong connections between the public and parks through a continuum of engaging recreational, educational, volunteer, and work experiences.
2. Connect urban communities to parks, trails, waterways, and community green spaces
3. Expand use of parks as places for healthy outdoor recreation that contribute to people’s physical, mental, and social well-being.
4. Welcome and engage diverse communities through culturally relevant park stories and experiences that are accessible to all.

From this theme and its goals, we draw the idea of connecting people to parks through outdoor play, and want to extend the network of outdoor play opportunities to include all parks, protected areas, and cultural sites.

Actions underway in the NPS that could be used as examples for future play opportunities include “Take a hike and call me in the morning,” a specific action in the Call to Action plan, and the “Healthy Parks, Healthy People US” program. Both initiatives target the third goal in the Connecting people to parks theme by engaging the health community, and make prudent use of the numerous health benefits derived from spending time in parks. Furthermore, the Healthy Parks, Healthy People US program seeks to expand this engagement to business innovators, scientists, advocacy organizations, and more. This development of partnerships across sectors is crucial to

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building support networks. These initiatives from our national leaders can serve as innovative templates and ideas for increasing outdoor play in our parks, protected areas, and cultural sites.

### Outdoor play

By 2009, former NPS Director Fran Mainella and many others recognized the trend of increasing disconnection from nature, particularly by young people. Mainella had witnessed it in national parks in the form of decreasing attendance, and Richard Louv documented both the disconnection and the tremendous health consequences in his book *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* (2008). Wondering whether a decrease in the value of play might be related to the growing gap in nature experiences, as well as the numerous health crises, Fran Mainella, Brett Wright, PhD, Chair of the Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management Department at Clemson University, and many others collaborated to organize the Summit on the Value of Play in June 2009.

The summit was held at Clemson University and convened leaders from diverse fields, including landscape architecture, business, education, medicine, health science, and parks and recreation. Through keynote speakers, poster presentations, and numerous breakout sessions, it became clear to participants that play and the value of play had disappeared from the fabric of everyday life for people of all ages. What had once been said, “Go out and play and come back in time for dinner,” was replaced by stranger danger, screen time, and hyper-structured activities. Summit participants urged the creation of the US Play Coalition as a partnership to promote the value of play throughout life. Furthermore, participants encouraged summit leaders to establish an annual conference and to create a website to facilitate linkages among the play community, to develop training materials, and to generally meet the needs of the growing play community.

Since 2009, this effort has blossomed, and the US Play Coalition hosts an annual conference on the value of play, which has received numerous international visitors, reaches a network of



nearly 1,900 with a monthly newsletter, communicates daily through social media networks, offers two certificate of completion programs (playground maintenance and play facilitation) in cooperation with Clemson University, has a dynamic website (<http://usplaycoalition.clemson.edu>), organizes play ambassadors and more, all with a focus on the value of play as a vital component of a healthy and happy life. Play in parks is a natural solution that meets both the mission of connecting people to parks, and the goal of addressing the play deficit and the resulting physical, mental, and emotional health crises. Play in parks is likewise important to developing the next generation of natural and cultural resource stewards, by giving them opportunities to

connect with park resources and build meaningful relationships with our special places. Thus, as current and burgeoning leaders, we must consider the role we can fulfill in making our parks, protected areas, and cultural sites more playful for people of all ages.

### Discussion

During the sharing and discussion portion of the café conversation, we were able to learn about new perspectives on play, and what was taking place around the country and world to create play opportunities in parks. Both successes and challenges were presented, and facilitated a robust dialogue and exchange. A selection of the topics and ideas shared is presented below.

In addition to the US Play Coalition, we acknowledged organizations, such as the National Park Trust, Let's Move, the National Wildlife Federation, the U.S. Forest Service, and more who are likewise using play to help move people toward living healthier and happier lives. For instance,

one participant talked about Kids in the Woods, and Children's Forests, two Forest Service initiatives to encourage play and exploration in our national forests. This shared mission to create play opportunities in our parks is a tremendous asset, because it will encourage collaboration and sharing of best practices among our groups.

A researcher commented on his study of resource protection and vegetation damage by children at a play site, providing the unexpected insight that small groups of children cause more damage than large groups. This raised an important challenge of balancing use and protection in our special places: how do we accommodate both? Can we create spaces resilient to repetitive play? Should we cycle use of particular areas with seasons, allowing time for recovery between play periods? Are certain places so sensitive that any play is too much? What are the consequences of restricting all play in an area?

A city planner for an ethnically diverse community commented on the need to consider language and phrasing when introducing activities, citing that "take a hike" could be misinterpreted. This comment emphasized the need to be inclusive of community members from all backgrounds when planning play opportunities. For instance, certain games may be common to one group but unfamiliar to another; how can we facilitate an exchange of play ideas and activities? This also ties back to the theme of connecting people to parks and providing culturally relevant opportunities and experiences that are open to all.

Accommodating technology in both practice and attitude was also cited as an important consideration. One participant made the point that children are maturing and developing skills in a wired world, and denying them the opportunity to engage with technology may be detrimental to long term success. Furthermore, eliminating or condemning use of all technology is likely to have a negative effect on attendance and participation, regardless of age. As an alternative to restricting technology, leaders may seek ways to integrate technology to enhance the outdoor play experience. Developing applications that facilitate exploration and reward users with badges and tokens may encourage participants to engage with the resources longer or in greater depth. Placing links to audio and video files on the web and on posted signs can facilitate self-paced learning. Technology cannot replace our parks, protected areas, and cultural sites, but it can act as a gateway to them. Thus leaders must strive for a balance between technology use, play, and nature experiences. Moving forward, we can work and play together to share best technology practices in our hyper-connected world.

Based on these comments and more, we recognize both the immense potential for, and barriers to, play in our parks as a pathway toward better physical, mental, and emotional health. Creating a dialogue about play is the first step, and we gratefully acknowledge all café conversationalists for their participation. We hope you too will join the conversation, but first we encourage you, as mom might have said, "to go out and play and come back in time for dinner!"

For more information on the US Play Coalition, visit us on the web at <http://usplaycoalition.clemson.edu/>.