

Ontario Parks wants you ... for 30 minutes a day

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By Mike Riley Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

For the month of August, Ontario Parks is trying to inspire Ontarians to become more active with its 30x30 Challenge, which is part of the Healthy Parks Healthy People initiative. They are asking them to spend 30 minutes a day over the 30 days of August at one of their parks to become more active, enjoy the outdoors and improve their physical and mental health.

When this program was announced on July 31, the Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, Jeff Yurek, issued the following statement;

"For months, individuals and families have been doing their part to stop the spread of COVID-19 by staying inside and I applaud everyone for their effort. With the progress we have made together, and as we move into Stage 3 of reopening the province, I am encouraging people of all ages and from all walks of life to take the opportunity to get out and safely enjoy our wonderful Ontario summer," he said.

Gary Wheeler is with the communications branch of the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks and says the response to the 30x30 challenge has been fantastic. He says that 2020 is the sixth year that Ontario Parks has offered the challenge and the interest grows every year.

"Today is only day six, but we're already seeing people taking up the challenge and posting their daily activities on social media. We have also noticed that a number of organizations are encouraging their followers to take up the challenge. 2020 has been a very challenging year. More than ever, people are recognizing the need to be out in nature to support their mental and physical health," he says.

Wheeler stresses that the safety of visitors and staff is always their top priority. They'll be implementing measures to address overcrowding and promote physical distancing in their park spaces and buildings during busy times by limiting occupancy for day use and camping in select parks. He says this may include limiting the number of daily vehicle permits sold or the number of campsites available for reservations. He also pointed out that visitors may notice that day use parking areas are not as full and some campsites will remain empty during certain times. Ministry officers will be on hand to provide information, help with emergencies and enforce parks regulations. Police and other enforcement agencies may also be patrolling the parks, according to Wheeler.

"Even if you didn't start the 30x30 challenge on Aug. 1, it's not too late to commit to spending 30 minutes a day out in nature. Consider going to your local park, a provincial park or even your own backyard. Any contact with nature is a boost to your health. We encourage visitors to click on the 'Parks' drop-down menu to view the facilities and activities icons to see what's available at the park you wish to visit. We're counting on people to be responsible when enjoying our parks and continue to follow all the public health advice, including physical distancing, wearing a mask when distancing isn't possible, washing hands regularly with soap and water or sanitizer and getting tested right away if you're worried you may have COVID-19," he says.

The objective of the Healthy Parks Healthy People movement is to promote the mental and physical health benefits of being out in nature, especially with increasing numbers of Ontarians living in urban areas. As part of this movement, Ontario Parks is trying, through nature, to improve the health and well being of everyone in the province. From the fall of 2019, Ontario Parks asked for and received 2,500 submissions from the general public, researchers, health policy and advocacy groups, health practitioners, environmental organizations, Indigenous organizations, educational organizations and tourism organizations on how to accomplish this. They found the following issues that could be impediments for people to get out and enjoy parks and green spaces; affordability, transportation to and from parks, accessibility for diverse audiences (like seniors, people in wheelchairs and parents with strollers), needing more free time to go to green spaces, having more green spaces and more funding and protection for those

green spaces, more organized events and programs at parks, ongoing communication and research about the health benefits of nature, having more extensive park facilities and trail systems, having a single source of information about parks, trails and healthy activities versus many and improving safety in some parks and green spaces.

Stephanie Jeffrey is the national chair of the National Fitness Leadership Association Canada and the executive director of the Manitoba Fitness Council, and thinks getting people outside and active is a great idea.

?This has been a rough year for the health of Canadians, not just with regards to the pandemic and its physical implications but the mental health and physical health of those that did not contract the disease is suffering. The motivation to get out and move is not inherent to everyone, some people need a little more prompting, especially if they're feeling unsafe leaving the house. There is much research that points to the physical and mental benefits of being outside and being active. Put these two things together and the results can't help but be great,? she says.

Jeffrey says that the NFLA, as well as the provincial fitness leadership certification bodies, have been encouraging people to get outside for months, to keep active whatever way they can. She says this focus also brings a welcome distraction to the new ways in which people can socialize with friends and our families.

?Being active outside is also social. Being locked in our homes and connecting online is better than not connecting at all, but many discount the benefits that come from being active with other people. When people are together, they tend to be happier, and participate in the activity longer than they would if they are just participating alone,? she says.

Jeff Angus is the president and managing director of the Ontario Fitness Council and the Fitness Practitioners Association of Ontario and agrees with Jeffrey that not only is it a smart initiative but a timely and necessary one.

?With the recent and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, 30 minutes of outside activity daily will benefit all of us physically and mentally,? he says.

Sarah Higginson works for Ontario Parks and says she's definitely partaking in the challenge during her off-hours;

?We visited the north end of Lake St. Peter Provincial Park and are hoping to do Kawartha Highlands and maybe Silent Lake this month too!? she says.

Josie Dinsmore is a freelance reporter with the Mattawa Recorder, a blogger and a photographer, and she says she'll be trying to participate at least some of the days of the 30x30 challenge.

?I will be spending a lot of time at Samuel de Champlain Provincial Park for day use, as it's the local Ontario Park in my area. I don't have any plans on travelling too far away from home this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I like to go out to the park for hikes, bike rides, for a swim at the beach and I also do landscape and nature photography. I usually end up visiting the park at least two or more times a week. I am also participating in the Great Cycle Challenge Canada this August where I will be riding my bike to help raise money for kids' cancer research,? she says. ?So, I will be outside many days participating in that event.?