



## Questions & Resources for Teams 2008 Massachusetts Envirothon Current Issue

# Outdoor Recreation and the Environment

The 2008 Mass Envirothon Current Issue asks teams to go outdoors and explore recreation issues in your own community, whether you live in a city, a suburb, or a rural town. In the course of your explorations, your team will identify a key recreational issue or opportunity, and make recommendations for next steps your community should take to address it.

If your team does a thorough job in your research, you can qualify for the **Mass Envirothon Community Research Award**. If you take what you learn from this research and apply it in service to your community, you can qualify for the **Mass Envirothon Community Action Award**.

This is not a comprehensive guide to all the issues and opportunities involved in outdoor recreation. The goal is simply to introduce you to some of the issues and to get you started in your own explorations.

This guide was prepared by Will Snyder, UMass Extension, with input from the Mass Envirothon committee and agency staff. Updates will be posted at <http://www.maenvirothon.org/currentissue.htm>. Your questions are welcome, as are your suggestions for other resources that will be helpful to Mass Envirothon teams. Contact Will Snyder at 413-545-3876 or [wsnyder@umext.umass.edu](mailto:wsnyder@umext.umass.edu).

## BACKGROUND

### Why do we need outdoor recreation?

**Informal, unstructured, fun time outdoors can cure “nature deficit disorder”.** Researchers are learning that we need direct experience of nature just as we need good nutrition and a good night’s sleep. See especially the Children and Nature Network’s web site at <http://www.cnaturenet.org/>

**Outdoor recreation can improve our physical health.** Our society is far too sedentary for our own good, and this has contributed to the current epidemic of obesity. Outdoor activities can get our blood pumping and our muscles working, and move us toward physical fitness.

**Outdoor recreation can strengthen our sense of place.** We enrich our lives and communities by making strong personal connections to the natural world in the places we call home.

**Outdoor recreation can build a constituency for environmental stewardship.** People work hard to protect the places that they love. If we are going to solve environmental problems in general, we need lots of people who care about the environment!

## Hot Topics and Interesting Angles

*The most important part of your preparation for the Current Issue will be to get to know the outdoor places in your neighborhood and the people and organizations who promote recreation and protect the environment in your community. Here are some of the ways that people in Massachusetts are talking about these issues in their communities.*

**Loving it to Death:** Outdoor recreation can damage and impair ecological systems. What activities can we choose and what practices can we use to lighten our footprint and minimize our impact on the natural world, in every form of recreation? Below are some examples of ways that natural resources can be affected by poor outdoor recreation practices and overuse.

- Water pollution (both groundwater and surface waters) can originate in pathogens from human waste, toxics such as leaking oil from internal combustion engines, water turbidity and sedimentation caused by walking or riding in streams and on streambanks, and excess nutrients and eutrophication
- Wave action, particularly from the wakes of motorized watercraft like jetskis, can erode streambanks
- Soils are eroded and compacted in high use picnic and camping areas and on trails
- Wildfires caused by unattended campfires, cigarettes, sparks from engines, or vandalism can change and destroy habitat and timber resources, cause water pollution, and diminish recreation potential
- Litter is an aesthetic problem, and more. Plastic items, particularly fishing line and six pack tops, can be a menace to wildlife.
- Damage to trees in areas where people camp include broken branches, stripped bark, drainage ditches that expose roots, removal of leaf litter from the forest floor, and scorching by campfires.
- Exotic invasive species, both aquatic and terrestrial, can be spread by hikers along trails and boaters moving from one pond or stream to another.
- Populations of rare or endangered species can be harmed by removal or disturbance of habitat.
- Wildlife habitat can be altered significantly by people in the woods or on the water. Poorly kept campgrounds can attract wildlife seeking food.

**Trail development.** Should we build and maintain more trails? Trails can provide a safe and easy way for people to get far into natural areas for recreation. They also provide an easy route for problems like invasive species. They confine human activity to a narrow strip of land, but they also concentrate that activity, leading to pollution, erosion, and habitat disturbance if they are heavily used. Rail trails can help combat climate change by providing safe bicycle commuting routes and preserving old rights of way for potential future rail development. Off trail activities on foot, like orienteering, geocaching, and just plain bushwacking can be exhilarating because they can take you to pristine, solitary places and surprising discoveries. At the same time, they result in much less controlled human impact, which becomes more and more of a problem as the intensity of use increases. A complete assessment of trails issues must also include the needs and perspectives of adjacent land owners and neighborhoods.

**Trail use conflicts.** The number and intensity of trail users is increasing. Can they all be accommodated? Horseback riding, mountain bikes, and hikers in summer, and snowshoers and cross-country skiers in winter may be compatible if users are courteous and the intensity of use is low. Motorized trail use -- off road vehicles and snowmobiles -- tend to be more damaging to the environment and more intrusive into the recreation experiences of others.

**Hunting:** Is hunting as an environmentally responsible form of outdoor recreation? There are strong arguments that it is. Hunting seasons are a proven, low cost tool for keeping some wildlife populations within the carrying capacity of the ecosystem. The money from hunting and fishing licenses is used to protect the species and habitat. A good hunter knows the ecosystems he is hunting in and can be a watchdog for the environment, sensitive to changes that affect game populations. In the field, the hunter tries to be both physically and environmentally invisible, arguably causing less disruption than other forms of outdoor recreation. And hunters become advocates for protecting the hunted species. However, as our

society becomes more and more urban, there are fewer hunters. Fewer families are passing along the tradition. Should hunting be encouraged?

**Bicycling and Walking.** Human powered transportation can be an important local way to conserve energy and combat climate change. These activities also promote health and fitness, and they are a form of recreation that people can do on a daily basis. Advocacy groups and initiatives include WalkBoston, the Massachusetts Bicycle Coalition, and the Mass Executive Office of Transportation's *Safe Routes to School*.

**Safety.** Parents often cite safety concerns as the reason to keep kids inside. Whether or not these concerns are well-founded, the resulting lack of outdoor experience can lead to even more concerns for safety, leading to even more nature deficit. How can the cycle be broken? Outdoor neighborhood activities, community service projects, just plain walking for exercise, can build the confidence and community to provide an antidote.

**No Child Left Inside/Great Park Pursuit.** Recognition of "nature deficit disorder" has generated a groundswell of creative programming initiatives in state park systems around the country that get families to visit parks and try new kinds of recreation. Massachusetts is a leader in this work.

**Universal Access.** Another important state parks initiative is to provide access to people of all abilities. How accessible are recreational opportunities in your community?

**Access to Lands and Waters for Outdoor Recreation.** Most public lands, even watershed lands set aside to protect drinking water supply, are open to some forms of recreation. Streams and ponds are held in common but access can be a problem. While we have a strong tradition of private property rights, many private landowners make their lands available for recreational purposes. Are there access issues in your community?

**Ethnic and Cultural Differences.** Urban parks and state park campgrounds often serve groups with contrasting recreational styles and expectations. Language differences can exacerbate misunderstandings of regulations. How can parks be for all, and help to bring us together?

**New Technologies.** Stronger, lighter, better designed clothing and equipment can increase comfort and extend the range of our outings. Cell phones and global positioning system (GPS) devices can give a sense of security that may or may not be warranted.

**Maps.** Maps are important tools for outdoor recreation. GIS software can allow people to make their own specialized maps. What maps are available for recreation in your community? What do they show and not show?

## **Resource People and Organizations**

- Several state agencies are directly involved with recreation: the Department of Conservation & Recreation (includes state parks and forests), MassWildlife, Coastal Zone Management
- Non Governmental Organizations involved in recreation include The Trustees of Reservations, Mass Audubon, the Appalachian Mountain Club
- Regional Planning Agencies engage in recreation planning often from the perspective of conserving energy and fighting sprawl
- Official planning processes in towns, including open space and master plans, include recreation as one of several priorities to be considered and balanced
- Local volunteer groups, such as watershed councils and stream teams have an interest in recreation
- Forest landowners and farmers play an important role by opening their lands to compatible recreation
- Groups organized around particular recreational activities can provide both advocacy and self-policing

## STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY INVESTIGATION

- *Get out there and DO IT! Explore places. Meet people. Try something new.*
- *Start as soon as possible: Outdoor explorations go better before the season gets too cold and dark.*
- *Leave more time than you think you will need for visits and interviews.*
- *Begin planning service projects by early winter.*
  
- Start with an assessment of your team's outdoor recreation assets and deficits:
  - your sense of place
  - maps and your ability to use them
  - your outdoor experience and skills
  - access to equipment
  - your confidence and interests in trying new things
  
- Pool what you know about the forms that outdoor recreation takes in your community. Be sure to consider different age and cultural groups.
  
- Explore your community's landscape and note local outdoor recreation spots. Some places may be officially recognized, some may be informal. Some are on public land, some are on private land. How do people access and make use of these places? What state parks are nearby?
  
- Get some perspective.
  - Interview someone over 60 years old about recreation when they were young.
  - Investigate different cultural and family traditions about outdoor recreation (e.g. hunting and fishing).
  - Contact other Envirothon teams to learn about the differences between recreation in your community and other Massachusetts communities -- rural, suburban, and urban.
  
- Survey the recreational habits of people in your community (e.g. where they go, when they go, how they travel, how far they travel). What is the carbon footprint of this outdoor recreation?
  
- Introduce yourselves to organizations, businesses, agencies, parks, and individuals who are involved in issues of outdoor recreation in your community. What are their interests and concerns?
  
- Review town master plans and open space plans and talk with the people who put them together about the recreation issues they encountered. What priorities (e.g. trails, land acquisition, etc.) did they identify? Do you agree?
  
- Investigate the role of recreation in the local economy. How do people make money and spend money on recreation?
  
- Map what you find. Use MassGIS resources to organize and present your research, and your ideas, questions, and proposals about outdoor recreation.
  
- **Most of All: DO IT! Visit local recreation places that are new to you. Try different forms of recreation. Consider what the outdoors means in YOUR life.**