

No Skateboards Allowed on the Sidewalk

Managing Non-Sanctioned Activities

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While skateboarding, farmers markets, and hot air ballooning may not appear to have much in common, they are all examples of sanctioned activities that typically began as non-sanctioned activities. Oftentimes, recreation trends move forward faster than agencies can respond. When people become bored with current offerings, or simply want to participate in a new activity that is not available to them, they tend to find somewhere to do it anyway.

For example, extreme droughts in the 1970s led to watering restrictions that left several empty swimming pools in Southern California neighborhoods. Pioneers of skateboarding took advantage of these empty pools and used them to perfect skateboarding tricks. These days, many skateparks feature pool-like elements in which skaters can perfect their tricks without sneaking into a community pool or someone's back yard. Now, as the saying goes, skateboarding is so popular that "if your town doesn't have a skatepark, it is one."

While not all non-sanctioned activities are potentially dangerous, they can be unintentionally destructive. In 2011, GreenPlay worked with Tapis Associates to create a Site Development and Management Plan for the Manitou Incline in Manitou Springs, Colorado. This makeshift trail was located on an old cable track on private property. Despite the presence of "no trespassing" signs, several people would utilize this trail on a daily basis. However, the trail was not specifically designed for hiking, and there were several places where hikers could be hurt. The goal of this plan was to upgrade the trail so that it could be used safely and without adversely affecting the landscape.

A non-sanctioned activity that is popular at the moment is Parkour. This is defined by Wikipedia as, "A training discipline focused on overcoming obstacles, involving moving from point A to point B in the fastest and most efficient way possible. It combines a variety of movements like running,

climbing, swinging, vaulting, leaping, and rolling." Participants typically utilize various buildings, alleyways, and other structures as points A and B. Inspired by military-style obstacle course training, this activity is a good way to improve agility and fitness levels, but it can be very dangerous if done unsupervised. Enthusiasts in some cities, including Seattle; Denver; and Washington, D.C., have reacted to this by implementing sanctioned programs and facilities, so that participants can be trained by professionals in a controlled manner.

Another non-sanctioned activity that is growing in popularity is geocaching. It is defined by Wikipedia as, "An outdoor recreational activity in which the participants use a Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver or mobile device and other navigational techniques to hide and seek containers, called 'geocaches' or 'caches,' anywhere in the world." Participants are basically involved in a high-tech "treasure hunt" as they navigate their chosen area to find a container filled with various items. Some of the challenges involved in geocaching have involved police who respond to people reporting "suspicious activity" (several caches have been mistaken for bombs and destroyed); caching on private property, therefore causing participants to engage in trespassing; and possible legality issues, as in some states, geocaching is illegal on historical and archaeological sites without written permission. Geocaching can be a great way to explore neighborhoods and learn life-skills such as navigation and problem solving. However, it should be monitored for the safety of participants. If police and community services members are aware of the activity, and it is performed in designated spaces, it may reduce the number of complaints about suspicious activity and trespassing, and minimize troubles with conservation management issues.

It may not be necessary or desirable to sanction every activity that people are performing on their own in your community. Still, by remaining aware of emerging trends and activities which may be disruptive to community assets such as open space, wildlife, and facilities, an agency can potentially mitigate these risks, find potential new users, and manage activities that are happening anyway.