Some Americans feel guilty about play. They reflect the traditional "work ethic" that ties all value to productivity. Considering all the evidence about the benefits of play and recreation, perhaps these people should feel guilty about not playing enough. America needs a new "leisure ethic" to balance its old "work ethic" -- and a leisure policy as well. Japan and many other countries have official governmental policies that encourage more leisure and recreation participation. In fact, the state governments of several countries contribute to the costs associated with trips taken during vacations to encourage people to benefit from their "holidays."

The benefits of leisure -- physical and mental health, economic development, family bonding, environmental awareness, and so on -- are now well-documented scientifically. When asked, most people on the street can also readily mention several ways they benefit (physical fitness, coping with every day life stresses, family bonding, learning, skill testing) from their recreation.

This evidence suggests that the benefits realized from leisure opportunities certainly equal, and most likely exceed, the benefits produced from other public services such as police and fire protection, transportation, housing, communication, sanitation, health, and educational services. Yet, while most governmental bodies in the United States and Canada have firmly established, clearly articulated, and funded policies and programs for these other services, few units of government have given public leisure services the same attention and resources. What causes this paradoxical reduced "political parity" to be given to leisure in North America?

An important factor that contributes to this paradox is the lingering "Puritan Ethic" which promotes the misconception that play and recreation stand opposed to social productivity. This is a misconception simply because a person can both play and work hard and because "re-creation" is needed for effective work performance. Although remnants of a strict work ethic still exist, the past 10-15 years has shown considerable demise in the degree to which that ethic tarnishes individuals' attitudes and beliefs about leisure. Many North Americans today purposively pursue "life-style management" through avoidance of substance abuse, good nutrition, stress management, planned systems of social interaction, and planned leisure including physical exercise.

If the work ethic is not the cause of the paradox, what is? A guess is that governmental bodies in North America do not give leisure parity with the other public services they provide simply because of the erroneous belief that most of the benefits of leisure are realized by individuals rather than by groups of individuals, such as families, communities, and society at large. If so, principles of public finance suggest that limited amounts of scarce tax dollars should be allocated to a social service that does not provide a broad social "good." Or more simply, if the benefits are largely realized by individuals, than they should find and pay for their own recreation, just as individuals should find and pay for their own food.

Most of the benefits of leisure do accrue individually to the recreationists who use recreation opportunities. Nevertheless, most of these benefits to individuals lead to other benefits that have social or collective merit and also that many of the immediate benefits of leisure are in fact social instead of individual in nature. The "social good" of leisure is both substantial and widely unappreciated. To build a case for the "social good" of leisure, a wide variety of the benefits of leisure will be listed below and examined in regard to the social merit of each. Since these benefits have impacts economically, physiologically, environmentally, psychologically, and socially, those classes of benefits will be used to help simplify the following discussion.

**Economic Benefits**

The tremendous economic benefits of leisure investments and expenditures have been well documented empirically, both in terms of how much people are willing to pay for leisure services and in terms of economic impacts of actual expenditures. Literally hundreds of recent studies have
documented that recreationists exhibit a great willingness to pay for their leisure opportunities -- usually considerably in excess of what they actually have to pay in the form of entrance and use fees. This reflects high levels of perceived benefit to these consumers. Perhaps more impressive are data that show the leisure industry is not just big, but is one of the biggest industries in the world in terms of cash flows, income generation, and creation of employment opportunities. Travel and tourism is now the world's largest generator of cash flows between nations, bigger than world-wide transactions for all agriculture products or for automobiles, each of which is a "big ticket" item in the world market. Furthermore, in our out of five of the 50 states in the United States, tourism currently ranks in the top three among all industrial sectors in the amount of income and/or employment it generates. A few example statistics on paying customers illustrate how big the leisure business is. As of June 1992, Disney World in California had attracted 300,000,000 visitors since it opened on July 17, 1955; the Alamo in Texas attracts 2.2 million visitors annually; and Colorado Ski Country USA reported on June 22, 1992 that Vail posted its best season ever with 10.4 million skier visits. In addition, many people believe that there-creative aspects of leisure increase both the quantity and quality of worker productivity and can reduce absenteeism from the job. There is also a strong conventional wisdom that leisure activity helps reduce social anomie and alienation and their associated economic costs to society.

All of these economic benefits accrue to collectives of people rather than to individuals. Given the economic scope and magnitude of the leisure and tourism industries, it is amazing that the United States has no national tourism policy. Why does one of the biggest promoters of foreign exchange, employment opportunities, and income receive so little public attention? It is puzzling, but there appears to be conventional wisdom that these sizable expenditures on leisure will not hold up or persist over time. This is puzzling because there has been no evidence of decay in these expenditures since the end of World War II.

Physiological Benefits

The physiological benefits of regular exercise are documented scientifically, probably better than the above-described economic benefits are. Regular aerobic exercise offers cardiovascular benefits by reducing serum cholesterol and triglycerides and in increasing high density lipids in the blood stream and by helping prevent and control hypertension. Exercise also reduces spinal problems, improves neuropsychological functioning, increases bone mass and strength in children, increases muscle strength and creates better connective tissue, increases lung capacity, in general reduces incidences of diseases, and nurtures a holistic sense of wellness. While all these benefits of exercise cannot be attributed to leisure behavior, many of us purposively exercise during our leisure time, and physical activity is required of many recreation activities motivated by personal goals other than physical fitness.

Many of these previously listed physiological benefits also accrue from stress management activities purposefully engaged in during leisure time. Those behaviors also promote psychophysiological benefits, including reduced tension and anxiety, mental and physical relaxation, reduction in stress hormones, in the blood and urine, positive changes in mood, and enhanced outlook on life. In turn, these more relaxed states promote other benefits, such as improved performance at work, improved social interactions, and a general sense of well-being.

While these physiological and psychophysiological benefits accrue mostly to individuals, it takes little imagination to see how society in general benefits from individuals who are healthier mentally and physically, are more productive at work, need to take out fewer of their stresses and strains on other people, and function better in all ways. Can any intelligent person question the "social good" that results from these physiological benefits of leisure? One would not think so, but why don't the decisions of public policy makers reflect this type of thinking? It is a paradox.

Environmental Benefits

Although not as well documented empirically as the economic, physiological, and psychophysiological benefits -- but nevertheless readily evident -- are the not commonly thought of contributions of the leisure sector to environmental protection. One reason listed in the 1964 Wilderness Act for creation of the currently 90-plus million acre Wilderness Preservation System was to preserve opportunities for "primitive types of recreation." Thus, creation and preservation of opportunities for recreation is one of the multiple driving forces for protecting not only natural
environments (including urban forests and other green spaces in cities) but also cultural, historic, and heritage sites.

Furthermore, it is logical to assume that the on-site recreational use and off-site study and appreciation of these areas promote environmental learning, nurture an environmental ethic oriented toward sustainability, and even help cause environmentally sound behaviors such as recycling. In addition, taxes on some recreation equipment help maintain local golf courses and state hunting and fishing areas, as do sales of special licenses to pursue particular recreation activities. Little needs to be said here about whether these environmental benefits contribute to the "social good." Fortunately, these contributions do seem to be understood and recognized in public policies.

**Psychological Benefits**

There is a rather lengthy list of psychological benefits that are known or thought to be attributable to leisure activity. Included are: perceived sense of freedom, independence, and autonomy; enhanced self-competence, improved sense of self-worth/esteem, self-reliance, and self-confidence; improved leadership skills; better ability to relate to others, including greater tolerance and understanding and improved abilities to be a member of a team; value clarification; enhanced creative ability; expressions of and reflection on personal spiritual -- and not just religious -- values and orientation; increased cognitive efficiency, including better problem solving ability; greater adaptability and resiliency; improved sense of humor; greater joy from life and enhanced perceived quality of life; more balanced competitiveness; enhanced sense of personal place and fit; increased learning about history, culture, nature, cities, etc.; more positive outlook; nurturance of a can-do attitude; and reduced personal sense of social alienation.

While there is less scientific evidence about these psychological benefits than for the previously mentioned three classes, there is considerable belief not only that these benefits exist but that they are quite pervasive, of great magnitude, and help promote and maintain characteristics that considerably enhance an individual's ability to function in, and contribute to, society at large. Put more simply, since these benefits do much "good" for individuals, they contribute to the "social good" because the "welfare" of a society reflects the welfare of its individuals. Yet, these collective benefits are not recognized adequately in the political arenas in North America.

**Social Benefits**

Last, but certainly not least, are the social/cultural benefits. Perhaps the best documented are the significant contributions of leisure and related amenities to pride in one's community (and nation) and to community satisfaction. For example, communities are proud of their football teams and local spectacular amenity resources, and monuments such as the Gettysburg Battlefield help us understand our culture better.

Leisure resources and opportunities also help maintain the central values and positive identities of communities. Certainly expenditures on leisure, especially by tourists, are vitally important to maintaining either the stability or promoting economic development of many communities, regions, and states -- as well as the nation. As mentioned above, both on- and off-site use of some types of recreation areas promotes enhanced cultural and historic awareness in a citizenry as well as improves natural environmental understanding.

In addition, leisure activities and places can maintain and enhance ethnic identities, meet the unique needs of particular segments of society (the elderly, single parents, children, teenagers, the physically disabled, vagrants, and the under-employed) that cannot be met otherwise. During leisure also, family bonds are strengthened, and other types of social cohesion and integration occur, which add substance and meaning to life.

Evidence is mounting that systems of social support and companionship contribute to longer, more disease-free, and higher quality life. Certainly many of these systems center, or are highly dependent, on leisure opportunities, places, and behavior. Although the empirical evidence is scarce, most of those in the leisure professions believe that appropriate leisure opportunities are necessary: for child development; to reduce social alienation; and to facilitate treatment and recovery of clinically institutionalized populations as well as ease the burdens of confinement for some populations such as those in jail. There is also widespread sentiment that these opportunities, if properly structured and administered, can contribute significantly to reduction of substance abuse, crime, and other social ills.
Finally on social benefits, many of the benefits of continuing education accrue during the leisure time when that learning and skill development is taking place. In aggregate these benefits constitute a sizable contribution to human welfare.

In summary then, the "social good" of leisure is truly staggering. Nevertheless, that "good" is usually recognized and promoted strongly in public resource allocations only at some local units of government. State/provincial and federal programs that extol these benefits, such as urban and rural development programs, generally receive more lip service than public funds, and this lip service varies with the administration that is in office.

The above identified social goods of leisure need to be better articulated so that leisure will be recognized in all political arenas as the valuable social service it is.

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**Distribuerat i Sverige och Finland av Fritidsvetarna:**

**Sverige:** Karlbergsvägen 86 B, S - 113 35 Stockholm. **Tel:** +46 (0)70 - 728 75 65.

**Finland:** Larsviksvägen 2 F, Fi – 02320 Esbo. **Tel:** +358 (0)44 - 201 90 50.

**E-post:** institutet@fritidsvetarna.com

[www.fritidsvetarna.com](http://www.fritidsvetarna.com)