Walking the Talk With Environmental Stewardship

By Michele White

As we look to the future, parks and recreation is essential to ensuring environmentally resilient communities that can withstand, adapt to and recover from environmental challenges, such as natural disasters, climate change and more. Successfully meeting these challenges requires park and recreation professionals, key elected officials and community members to recognize and support techniques and practices that mitigate and/or prevent climate situations from occurring. Three such ways to get started include ensuring environmental sustainability and climate-ready parks, ensuring communities are ready for weather events and natural disasters through emergency preparedness and response approaches, and leading environmental education to support awareness and a connection to nature in communities across the country.

Sustainability and Climate-Ready Parks

With changing pressures on communities and their parks, ensuring developed and undeveloped open spaces and facilities are managed sustainably to conserve resources like water, energy and land is vital. This work also includes ensuring agencies are prepared for ever-changing weather, including increasing heat, drought, floods and more. While 43 percent of park and recreation agencies have formal sustainability plans (tinyurl.com/phc5dvas), the majority of agencies are participating in this work whether they recognize it formally or not. Some examples of these efforts include increasing the number of trees in parks; identifying low-mow areas in green spaces — like in City of St. Louis and New York City (tinyurl.com/bdhvxeyr) where they are converting unused lawn to native gardens and forests; using smart irrigation to manage water use — like Denver, where they are saving more than 15 percent on water use (tinyurl.com/4bzutsyz); and switching to LED lights and other energy upgrades — like Tennessee State Parks did to go green (tinyurl.com/3zm6xhkz), saving $1.8 million. Park and recreation professionals also are looking at where they can include bioswales to manage and filter stormwater runoff and add trees species that are able to better withstand a changing environment while providing shade for people enjoying their parks. These are just a few examples of how parks are actively engaging in environmental resiliency, and these actions lead to larger environmental and health impacts that benefit our communities.

Emergency Preparedness and Management

Communities are facing ever-changing emergencies. Eighty-five percent of park and recreation agencies are highly involved in preparing for and responding to natural disasters and emergency situations (tinyurl.com/4f4jjjes). Parks are both key to helping prevent the severity of impacts while also helping communities during crisis. The July issue of *Parks & Recreation* magazine shared examples of agencies putting preparedness and management into practice (tinyurl.com/bdey4v4a). Examples included nature-based solutions to flooding in Franklin, Indiana, and New Orleans, combating wildfire in Paradise, California, and emergency shelters in Oak Park, Illinois. Nationally, many park and recreation facilities provide shelter, key staging centers for response units, public gathering spaces for distribution of resources and information, and other important support. These examples highlight just a few of the many ways parks and recreation plays a key role in all phases — before, during and after — an emergency.

Environmental Education

Parks provide great opportunities for kids and adults to engage in a variety of programs, connect with nature, and support environmental efforts that can continue to be practiced at home. These efforts help to create our next generation of park and nature advocates and professionals. Antioch, Tennessee, and Sunrise, Florida, leveraged a BioBlitz to engage and educate their community (tinyurl.com/y9a7y9jd). Antioch helped strengthen its community connection to nature and each other by sharing multigenerational stories and recipes. Sunrise used its BioBlitz to educate snowbirds and locals on an essential plant for a thought-to-be-extinct butterfly, Atala — helping to

change the community's view of what plants are pretty and understanding the importance of native species in supporting biodiversity.

NRPA looks forward to continuing to support the field in advancing environmental efforts with a key focus on agencies mitigating emergencies through sound practices, preparing professionals to respond to emergency situations when they arise, and always supporting parks and recreation with climate impacts and sustainability in mind.

To that end, NRPA has collaborated with park professionals from across the country to develop several resources that support agencies with environmental best practices and education programs.

Sustainability and Climate-Ready Parks

NRPA is proudly offering several new on-demand resources to support members interested in building their skills to advance environmental sustainability. Trainings and resources available through your NRPA membership include:

Two Skill Builders that are designed to fit members' busy schedules and offer key insights into protecting ecosystems and lowering environmental impact through parks:

- How To: Sustainable Parks Assessment Tool
- Where to Begin: Environmental Sustainability

Two Training Centers providing on-demand pathways guiding members to discover more through a variety of learning formats:

- The On-Demand Sustainability in Practice Training Center
- The Environmental Sustainability Training Center

More tools and resources are available in the Environmental Resilience Library on NRPA Connect (connect.nrpa.org).

All these resources and learning experiences aim to help our field develop leadership skills around the ever-evolving topic of environmental sustainability and climate-readiness, environmental education, and emergency preparedness and response.

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