

Is Blue Space Accessibility Important? Signs Point to Yes

Cameron DiSanto

Abstract

This article advocates for increased blue space accessibility for Millersville University students. Blue spaces are open-space areas which feature ponds, rivers, creeks, or another body of water and are a water-centered subset of green spaces, which encompass public parks or other areas high in natural vegetation. Access to blue spaces is beneficial to the physical, mental, and emotional health of individuals who spend time around them. This piece promotes the Conestoga River Club, an organization that seeks to connect the Lancaster area community to the river and each other via recreational activities on its waters. The Conestoga River is a tributary of the Susquehanna that borders the southwest corner of Millersville University's campus. This article originates from the "Susquehanna Stories" project, the aim of which was to convey a story that communicated the value of an area on the Susquehanna as well as advocate for a threat it is facing.

It's a nice late afternoon one spring, and I am feeling antsy cooped up in my dorm at Millersville University. I know of a trail nearby the Conestoga River, which flows just southeast of the university, and think I'd rather spend some time there than walk around the campus itself.

Once I put on my boots and head out, it is still slightly damp from the previous day's rain. This doesn't really bother me... not until I come to one particular spot in the trail. I try to make the step up the small dirt incline, but there's nothing for me to stabilize myself on. I slip and, thankfully, catch myself on my hands, and not my face.

My only injuries are a bruised ego from knowing I'll have to walk back into the South Village dorms with a pant leg covered in mud. But as I get up and look to my left, seeing just how close I am to the chilly, still fast-moving waters below, I realize how much worse of a situation I'd be in if I'd stumbled just a little harder.

After having a couple too many near-misses on the trail like that, I learned to be a bit more careful. The nature of a riparian area, that is, one right along a riverbank, makes it more prone to erosion than more inland trails. Knowing this, I now won't go on the narrowest parts of the trail if it's too damp and/or dim out. While it's not the worst inconvenience in the world,

neither should it really be a problem in the first place. If the weather's nice, I shouldn't have to be too worried about slipping in the river to go out and enjoy it.

The Conestoga River Club is an organization that understands this as well. They have a mission statement to secure usable public recreational access. Their focus is on the Conestoga River Water Trail, and as of recently—early 2021, according to a blog post on their site—they have been named the local managers of it (Roy 2021). Water trail managers are responsible for such activities as improving and increasing access points, signage, and safety & navigability.

The Conestoga River's water trail hasn't had active local management for a notable amount of time. As stewards of the river, they are responsible for maintaining access points. River access points are public places where one could launch for recreational water activities, such as kayaking. Many of these such sites are categorized as "Challenging" or "Very difficult" to access. And two of these "Challenging access" locations are in our very own MU Biological Preserve (Conestoga River Club, 2021).

On one nice afternoon in mid-October, Todd Roy, the founder and president of the Conestoga River Club, met one of Millersville's writing classes out near the water. His passion for the river was clear, talking emphatically about the Conestoga River's importance in history, and about familial connections he forged while out on the water. One of his most emphatic takeaways was that everybody has a "river story". He believes that everybody has a personal connection to a river, some way, somehow. It is this common ground through which he likes to connect with others. Todd Roy is far from the only individual to notice the positive effects that time spent in nature can have on a person.

Multiple studies have been conducted in an attempt to quantify its benefits.

In 2010, a review of studies centered around the practice of *shinrin-yoku*—a Japanese phrase meaning 'to take in the forest atmosphere'—found a correlation between participants who practiced the activity and lowered physiological stress markers. The difference was greater than those who took an urban walk. Participants showed a decrease in pulse, blood pressure, cortisol levels, and other biomarkers to indicate physical relaxation (Park et. al., 2010).

Another study, conducted in 2012, aimed to determine psychological effects of spending time in nature by comparing against a control group who did not in people with MDD (major depressive disorder). Participants demonstrated a greater working-memory capacity after nature walks, which is a cognitive function that is impaired in individuals with depressive disorders. Not only that, but their positive affect, i.e. their mood, was improved after the nature walks as well (Berman et. al., 2012). This is an expansion on previous studies, which showed similar effects in a more generalized population.

Yet another study specifically looked at the effects of spending time in blue spaces. Blue space is a concept similar to that of green space, which are open spaces full of vegetation and designated for aesthetic and/or recreational purposes, typically in a more urban area. Blue spaces differ in that they notably feature close proximity to a body of water, such as a lake, river, or ocean. And, similarly to the previous analyses, researchers also found that participants had a more beneficial sense of well-being and mood when instructed to spend time around the blue spaces versus in other settings (Vert et. al., 2020).

Studies like these provide concrete evidence to support the anecdotes Todd,

myself, and others have shared about how spending time with the Conestoga has positively impacted our lives. Getting out to a river, like the Conestoga, to hike or paddle can improve not only one's physical health, but their emotional well-being as well. Constituents of communities near rivers have the right to take advantage of water trails and riparian trails if they so choose.

Maintenance is necessary to ensure open access for everybody. Organizations who take on the helm of stewardship of a river need funding, volunteers, and the general support of their communities to make their missions a reality. The water of the Susquehanna and its tributaries like the Conestoga are valuable as a natural, public recreational resource. As a community, we need to do our best to treat them as such.

More information about the Conestoga River Club can be found on their website at ConestogaRiverClub.org, where one can sign up to keep on top of relevant news and events. The organization also has a public page and forum on Facebook.

References

- Berman, M. G., Kross, E., Krpan, K. M., Askren, M. K., Burson, A., Deldin, P. J., Kaplan, S., Sherdell, L., Gotlib, I. H., & Jonides, J. (2012). Interacting with nature improves cognition and affect for individuals with depression. *Journal of affective disorders*, *140*(3), 300–305. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2012.03.012>
- Conestoga River Club. (2021). Access Points. *Conestoga River Club*.
<https://conestogariverclub.org/access-points>
- Park, B. J., Tsunetsugu, Y., Kasetani, T., Kagawa, T., & Miyazaki, Y. (2010). The physiological effects of Shinrin-yoku (taking in the forest atmosphere or forest bathing): evidence from field experiments in 24 forests across Japan. *Environmental health and preventive medicine*, *15*(1), 18–26. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12199-009-0086-9>
- Roy, T. (2021). February Happenings. *Conestoga River Club*.
<https://conestogariverclub.org/blog/f/february-happenings#2a7dabd0-57e7-4337-bfa5-2987b5d73ed2>
- Vert, C., Gascon, M., Ranzani, O., Márquez, S., Triguero-Mas, M., Carrasco-Turigas, G., Arjona, L., Koch, S., Llopis, M., Donaire-Gonzalez, D., Elliott, L., Nieuwenhuijsen, M. (2020). Physical and mental health effects of repeated short walks in a blue space environment: A randomised crossover study. *Environmental Research*, 188.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2020.109812>.