



David Scott*

URBAN PARKS: Combating Time Scarcity

Many Americans have an acute sense of time scarcity—the feeling that they lack enough time to do all they want to do. Park and recreation managers have been slow to address time scarcity. This is unfortunate because the survival of their organizations may well depend on their being regarded as a wise use of constituents' time.

Lack of time is the reason cited most often for people not exercising, not visiting local parks, and not participating in locally sponsored recreation programs or other free-time activities. Time scarcity also increases stress. A growing number of Americans say they are constantly trying to accomplish more tasks than they can handle. Time scarcity is also reflected in the fact that more Americans are engaging in time-saving behaviors, including shopping by computer, eating take-out food, and paying other people to clean their homes.

Three major factors contribute to time scarcity:

- Rising standards of living since World War II have enabled many Americans to buy an avalanche of consumer goods and services. This has created strain in that *consumption takes time*.

* Professor and Extension Recreation, Tourism and Park Specialist, The Texas A&M System

The more goods we buy, the more demand we put on our limited free time to consume them.

- Americans must assimilate a growing amount of information. Technological innovations and the electronic media bombard Americans with up-to-date information about new products, current events, trends, styles, and ways of doing virtually everything. Being a “good” consumer and citizen takes time and energy.
- Free time has remained relatively constant over the past 40 years—Americans have averaged between 35 and 40 hours of free time per week since 1965. No new changes in the work week are on the horizon, which means that the amount of free time is unlikely to keep pace with the demands that consumption and information overload place on it.

Individuals can combat time scarcity, in part, by turning off their televisions. According to Nielsen’s “Three Screen Report,” Americans watch more than 151 hours of TV a month. Individuals can delegate one night a week as a “no television” night and, in turn, spend time visiting a local park.



Park and recreation organizations should build strategies into their marketing and programming to combat the time constraints of their constituents:

- Expand opportunities to make reservations for facilities and programs.
- Make parks easy to access for more self-directed leisure experiences.
- Provide complete information in promotional literature and Web pages about the time requirements for programs.

Park and recreation managers must recognize they are in competition for their constituents' free time. Agencies that waste people's time are likely to be shunned by time-conscious constituents and may lose public support when funding decisions are made.

For more information

Contact Jamie Rae Walker, Extension Program Leader for Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences, at jamie-rae-walker@tamu.edu for more information about parks.

Additional reading

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Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences – www.rpts.tamu.edu

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