

FROM IDEA TO IMPACT • SPARKING IMAGINATION!

Written by: Chantel Doerksen (Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association) and Liz Weaver (Tamarack Institute)

IMPACT SUMMARY

- **60%** strongly agreed SPARKS help them build or strengthen their connections with peers across the province
- **Over 50%** agreed that by attending SPARKS, they further understand and value the critical role of the industry as a driver of community development, wellbeing and belonging.

THE BIG IDEA

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted nonprofit organizations and collaborations in many ways. Prior to the pandemic, the Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association (SPRA) hosted an annual conference for its members and partners in different locations across the province. This was a common practice for many provincial and national associations. But the pandemic changed everything.

For a period of three years, most organizations in Canada transitioned from annual, in-person gatherings to seeing each other in virtual and online spaces. SPRA was no different. Coming out of the pandemic years, the SPRA team set an ambitious goal of reimagining their annual conference.

SPRA wanted to challenge the thinking of recreation and parks leaders across Saskatchewan. This is the story of how SPARKS 2024 was born. Funded by Saskatchewan Lotteries, SPRA is a nonprofit dedicated to connecting, educating and inspiring parks and recreation providers to create parks and recreation spaces **for the benefit of everyone.**



Simply put, I was very impressed. SPRA understands our concerns and it showed in the event that was offered to us. While I've historically seen these events primarily as opportunities to network and visit other communities' facilities, this year I came with a desire to get a lot out of the sessions themselves and I feel that I did that in most every session.

-SPARKS Conference participant

THE PROGRESS MADE TOGETHER

In August 2023, the Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association (SPRA) reached out to the Tamarack Institute to ask for support to co-design the 2024 SPRA conference planning team.

A SPRA staff member had recently attended a Tamarack event in Alberta and raved about the design of the event. SPRA was in the early stages of designing their annual conference the following year. The SPRA partners had not gathered since 2019 and they were looking to create an experience that provided inspiration, engagement and connection.

The Tamarack Institute has more than 20 years' experience in designing fun and engaging learning experiences and has supported parks and recreation associations across Canada. A conversation took place, and the collaborative partnership was born.

PARTNERING WITH SPRA: A CO-DESIGNED APPROACH

Between Summer 2023 and May 2024, SPRA and Tamarack worked as a collective team to design and develop SPARKS 2024. The process included the recruitment of a Co-Design Team consisting of key SPRA partners and staff to meet monthly to frame, identify and review the curriculum and participant experience.

SPRA had already selected the venue, Wanuskewin, a gathering space and site in the plains of Saskatoon which is a living reminder of the relationship of Indigenous people and the land. The gathering space and site were designed to add to deepening the connection of participants to Indigenous knowledge, on-site learning and a connection to Truth and Reconciliation.



SPARKS 2024 CONFERENCE GOALS

Inspiration: We hope to inspire them in ways that will elevate the value and importance placed on recreation as the foundation of quality of life in Saskatchewan and across Canada

Engagement: The participants will engage with innovative ideas, industry trends and research, high level conversations and the latest updates to the Framework for Recreation in Canada

Connection: Intentional opportunities for networking and connection with the land and its history will be woven into the conference experience



SPARKS 2024 GOALS

To engage senior leaders and members in a conversation about the role, impact and future of parks and recreation in Saskatchewan

To build a common approach to advancing social connections and belonging through parks and recreation experiences

To deepen collective commitment to the critical role of parks and recreation as a driver for communities

WHAT EXPERIENCE DID WE CREATE?

- Opportunities to reconnect
- Opportunities to innovate and sharing of promising practices
- Emergence from the virtual space into the in-person space again

Themes to spark conversation

Leadership • Changing demographics • Complexity • Belonging and social isolation • Equity, diversity, inclusion, justice, and reconciliation • Turnover of staff • Recreation isn't exciting or attractive • Embrace the value of recreation • Volunteerism is struggling in small communities • How to make volunteerism attractive • Managing risk • Navigating the intersection of recreation and economic development • The changing world of work • Addressing the impacts of climate change

EVENT DETAILS

Event Name: Sparks 2024 – Igniting Parks and Recreation Providers

Date: May 7-8, 2024

Location: Wanuskewin, Saskatchewan

Host Hotel: Saskatoon Inn

Event Host: Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association

Audience: 150 -175 members of Saskatchewan's Recreation industry, and Community Leaders



SPARKS 2024 participants learning about the land around [Wanuskewin](#).

Weaving into the participant experience included a regathering of SPRA members and partners. Special touches included reconnecting experiences and gathering around the campfire at dinners. The co-designed agenda paid attention to opportunities for networking, gathering, learning, fun and for self-reflection.

The overall theme for the two-day gathering was “SPARKS 2024”. The initial design consisted of the following components for the Co-Design Team to consider.

THE IMPACT – SHARING RESULTS

This was a different approach to a parks and recreation gathering. The intention of the event was to look holistically at the role of parks and recreation practitioners in supporting community and community innovation. Parks and recreation providers contribute significantly to the wellbeing and engagement in their communities. They are a critical part of community infrastructure. The SPARKS 2024 gathering was designed to reflect the important role that parks, and recreation professionals play in community change efforts.



© SPRA

From the participant perspective:

- **60%** strongly agreed Sparks help them build or strengthen their connections with peers across the province
- **Over 50%** agreed that by attending Sparks, they further understand and value the critical role of the industry as a driver of community development, wellbeing and belonging.



Thank you for the work that was put into reimagining the conference. I appreciated the approach, I felt presenters executed a full circle learning experience that meant I was really rethinking, adjusting and growing — which is great!

-Conference participant

THE TAMARACK INSTITUTE: A CONSULTING AND LEARNING PARTNER

The Tamarack Institute played an important role as a consulting and learning partner with the Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association. Throughout this eight-month collaboration, Tamarack and SPRA were able to creatively leverage their unique organizational capacities and connections.

- The Co-Design Team was drawn from the SPRA network.
- Tamarack and SPRA were able to identify workshop speakers and topics generated by the Co-Design Team.
- The participant experience included on-site activities at Wanuskewin as well as specially designed activities which engaged participants in conversation with each other.
- There were a number of interactive sessions which created deep learning experiences.
- In the planning, design and delivery, Tamarack and SPRA shared ideas and collaborated on actions which led to successful conference outcomes.

SHARING LESSONS LEARNED

A conference, gathering or learning event doesn't "just happen". It takes the dedication of a team of leaders to design the whole experience. The design team must consider many diverse components to make the event a success.

The success of a conference is more than just the opportunity to gather, it also includes overall elements including conference theme, participant engagement and experience, speaker engagement and support, location and how this contributes to a sense of belonging and community, hospitality, and learning and reflection.

SPRA had the ambition to create a new experience for its members coming out of the pandemic. From location, to curriculum, to participant experience and engagement, SPARKS 2024 delivered. The Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association and Tamarack are currently planning to work collaboratively on future projects.



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OUR **FREE RESOURCE HUB!****



DEEPEN YOUR LEARNING

- Visit the Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association [website](#).
- To learn more about Wanuskewin and their story, visit their [website](#).
- To learn more about Tamarack, visit the Tamarack Institute [website](#).
- Browse Tamarack's [free resource hub](#) and [learning centre](#).
- Browse Tamarack's [networks for change](#).

**This document was created in collaboration with the
[Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association](#).**

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Turtle Island (North America) is the ancestral home of Indigenous peoples of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit descent. We recognize that across this land Indigenous rights holders have endured historical oppression and continue to experience inequities that have resulted from the widespread colonialist systems and ideologies that perpetuate harm to Indigenous peoples to this day.