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The Value of Urban Parklands: A User Study of the Baldwin Hills Park System

Stephanie Kim & Edward Hustleby

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Introduction

Urban parklands are well-documented as critical resources that provide users with extensive benefits and protect open spaces and natural habitat. The Baldwin Hills (BH) urban park system serves residents of Culver City, Los Angeles, Inglewood, local unincorporated counties, and the Larger Los Angeles County, as well as tourists and visitors from other parts of the region. This poster represents the pilot phase of an impending 2-year comprehensive survey of BH park user experiences that aims to inform improvements to quality of urban recreational spaces. The pilot study focused on 6 heavily used parks/riverways within the BH system. Ten undergraduate research assistants (URAs) were trained according to LMU's Institutional Review Board policies for human subjects research. URAs visited each park and conducted user surveys that included the following: frequency of park use, demographics, park activity engagement, park accessibility, and health/disposition. URAs also conducted strategic counts of the number of park visitors. A total of 8 visitor counts and 236 surveys were conducted. This study yielded numerous recommendations on how to improve local urban parks, such as: extending the park grounds to surrounding neighborhoods, adding public transit stops nearer to the parks, installing educational exhibits around the sites to increase environmental awareness, etc. Future efforts will be focused on expanding the scope and scale of the survey assessments and narrowing down the questions to more user-specific topics.

Purpose

The BH parks impact several different neighborhoods and cities, including Culver City, Los Angeles, Inglewood, local unincorporated county, and the larger Los Angeles County. Furthermore, the BH parklands serves a greater-than-local interest given that Los Angeles experiences very high levels of tourism (Gladstone & Fainstein, 2001) and, as such, urban parks like those in the BH are used heavily by both local residents and near and distant visitors. These urban parklands are critical resources in providing extensive social and health benefits to people, e.g. social connectedness, mental and physical well-being (Chiesura, 2004; Dwyer, McPherson, Schroeder, & Rowntree, 1992).

There has been significant support for this LMU Urban Parklands study as consistently, local residents have advocated for better quality open and recreational green spaces in their communities (Alkon, 2008), and diverse sets of stakeholders including local and state government entities, local communities, and environmental justice non-profit organizations agree with and are motivated by the interests of the BHC.

This study will inform ongoing initiatives, specifically the BH Master Plan and Park to Playa (Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, Office of Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, & Baldwin Hills Conservancy, 2012), along with additional recommendations for land development, restoration efforts, and resource allocation, and will identify additional potential funding avenues. This study, supported by Proposition 84 funds through the Baldwin Hills Conservancy (BHC) is, therefore, well-aligned with the BHC's priorities given its commitment to the acquisition of open space, protection of natural habitat, and provision of recreational and educational resources for users in the BH.

Methods & Site Description

The Urban Parklands study is being conducted in two phases: a short-term pilot study which spanned the time period from August to December, 2014, and a more extensive, longitudinal study culminating in July, 2017 (Table 1). The pilot study focused on the necessary development, testing, and revision of original park studies survey instruments - a Park Visitor Profile and a Visitors Count instrument, which were approved by the LMU Institutional Review Board. The pilot study was focused on 6 heavily used parks/riverways within the BH (Fig. 1): (i) the Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area (two locations), (ii) the Culver City Park, (iii) the Ladera Soccer Fields, (iv) the Norman O. Houston Park, (v) the BH Scenic Overlook and, (vi) the Ballona Creek Bike Path.

- ❖ Ten undergraduate research assistants (URAs) were recruited to support the research staff within CUREs. All researchers, including the URAs, were trained according to LMU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) policies for social scientific research with human participants. Following training and orientation, the URAs were assigned in pairs to each park and riverway site. For data collection, URAs intercepted park visitors and invited them to participate in a short, in-person survey interview.
- ❖ URAs also strategically conducted visitor counts across each park and riverway site by counting the number of unique park visitors within 15 minute windows at two separate, highly populated locations in each park/riverway site. A total of 8 of these visitor counts (for fifteen minutes each) were conducted at each of the two separate locations within each park/riverway site. Furthermore, 4 of these counts were conducted during the morning and 4 of these counts were conducted during the afternoon/early evening.

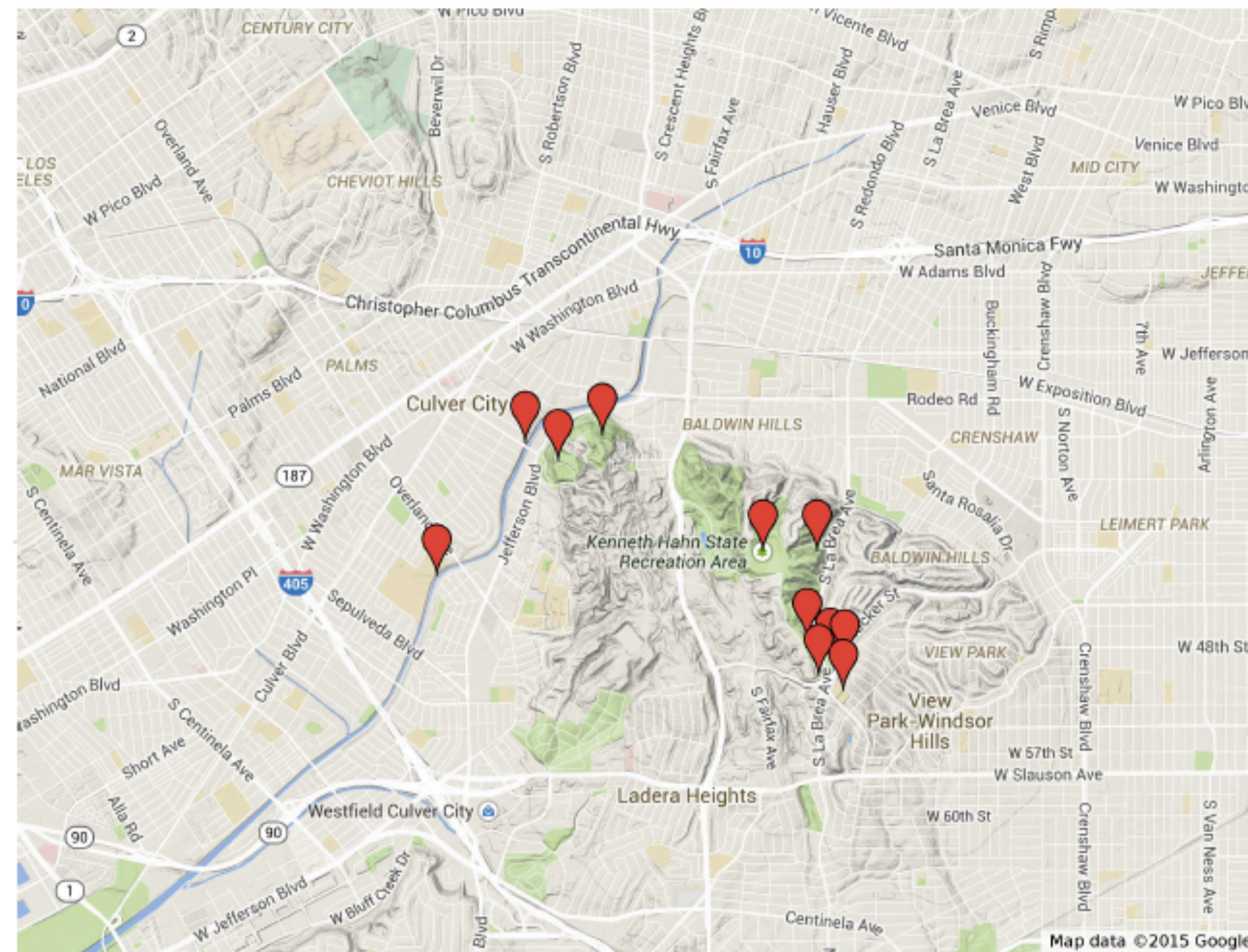


Figure 1. Map of the survey collection sites in the Baldwin Hills Park System, Los Angeles County, California.

Table 1. Overview of Data Collection for each study phase.

Study Phase	Timeline	Sample Size
Pilot	August, 2014	250 total (approx. 42 surveys per site)
Comprehensive	July, 2015 to July, 2017	6,000 total (approx. 750 surveys semiannually at each of 4 zones)



Figure 2. Image taken in the Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area, part of the Baldwin Hills Park System, Los Angeles County, California.

Preliminary Results

Visitor profile survey questions focused on the following: 1) Number of park users, 2) Frequency of use, 3) Demographics, 4) Park activity engagement, 5) Park accessibility, and 6) Health and disposition. We share a representation of some of the results here.

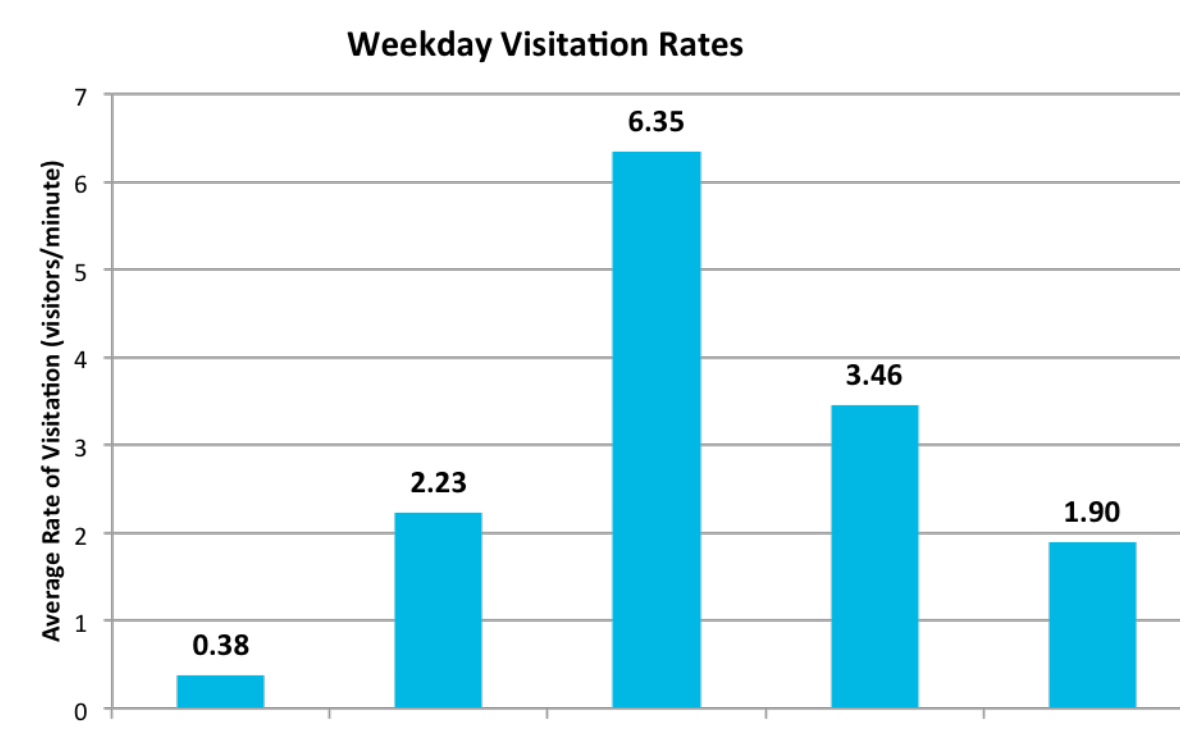


Figure 3. Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook Park had the highest rate of weekday visitors, 6.35 visitors/minute. Norman Houston Park had the lowest amount of weekday visitors, 0.38 visitors/minute.

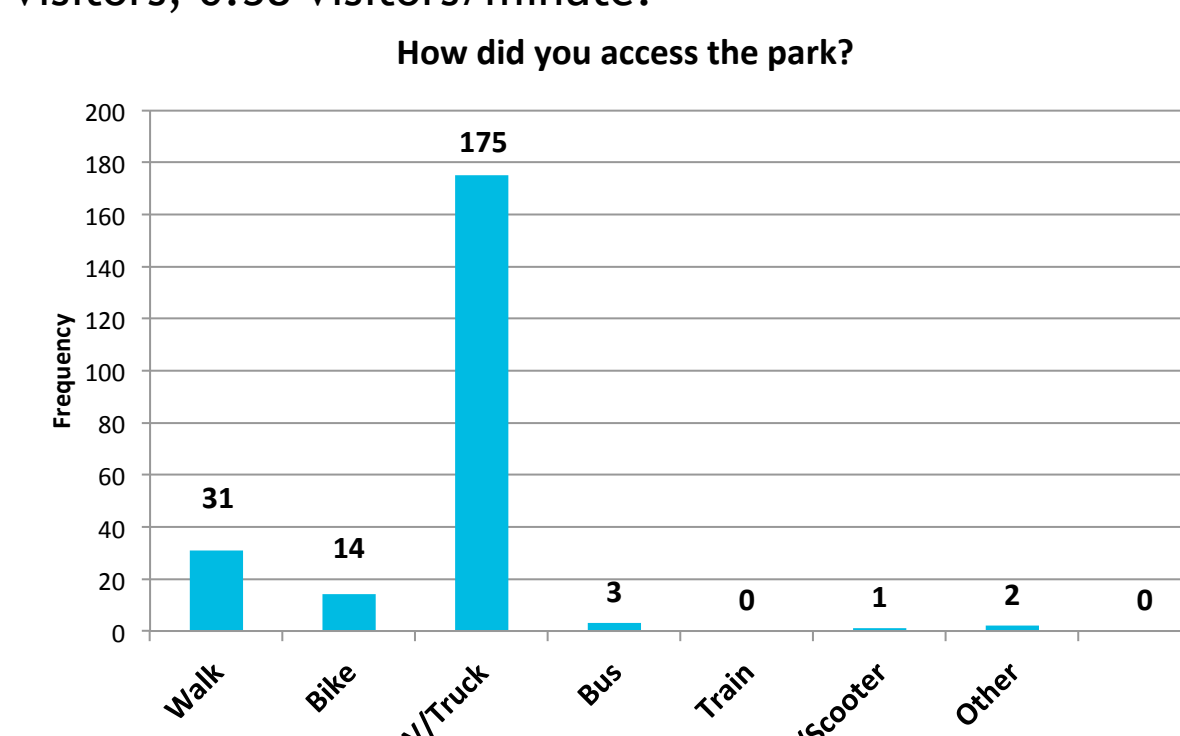


Figure 4. By far, most park visitors accessed the park via car, truck or SUV. Walking and biking were the next most frequent modes of transportation, respectively.

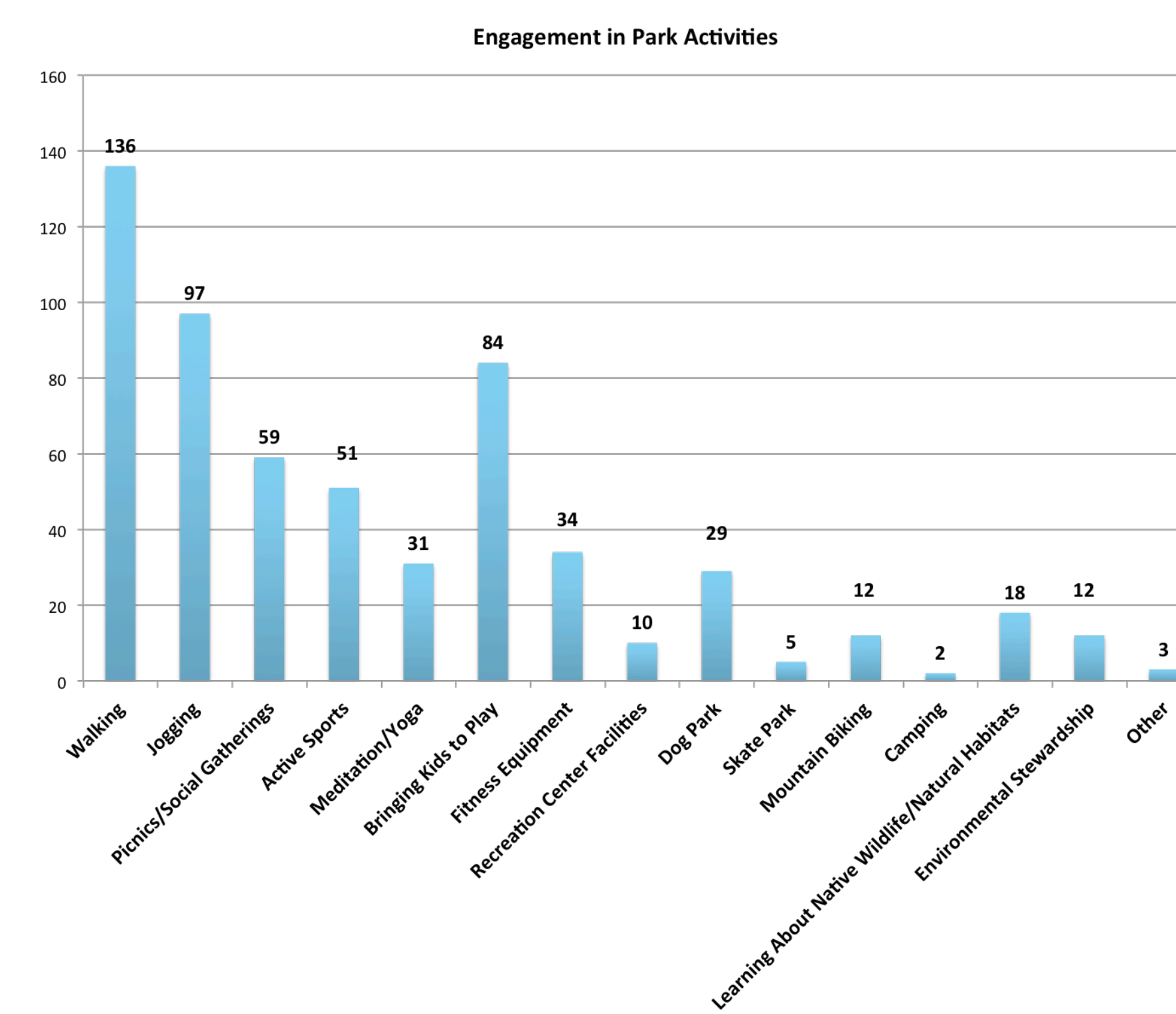


Figure 5. The BH parklands support a wide variety of activities amongst visitors. The park users participated in a number of different activities, the most popular being walking (136), jogging (97) and bringing the kids to play (84).

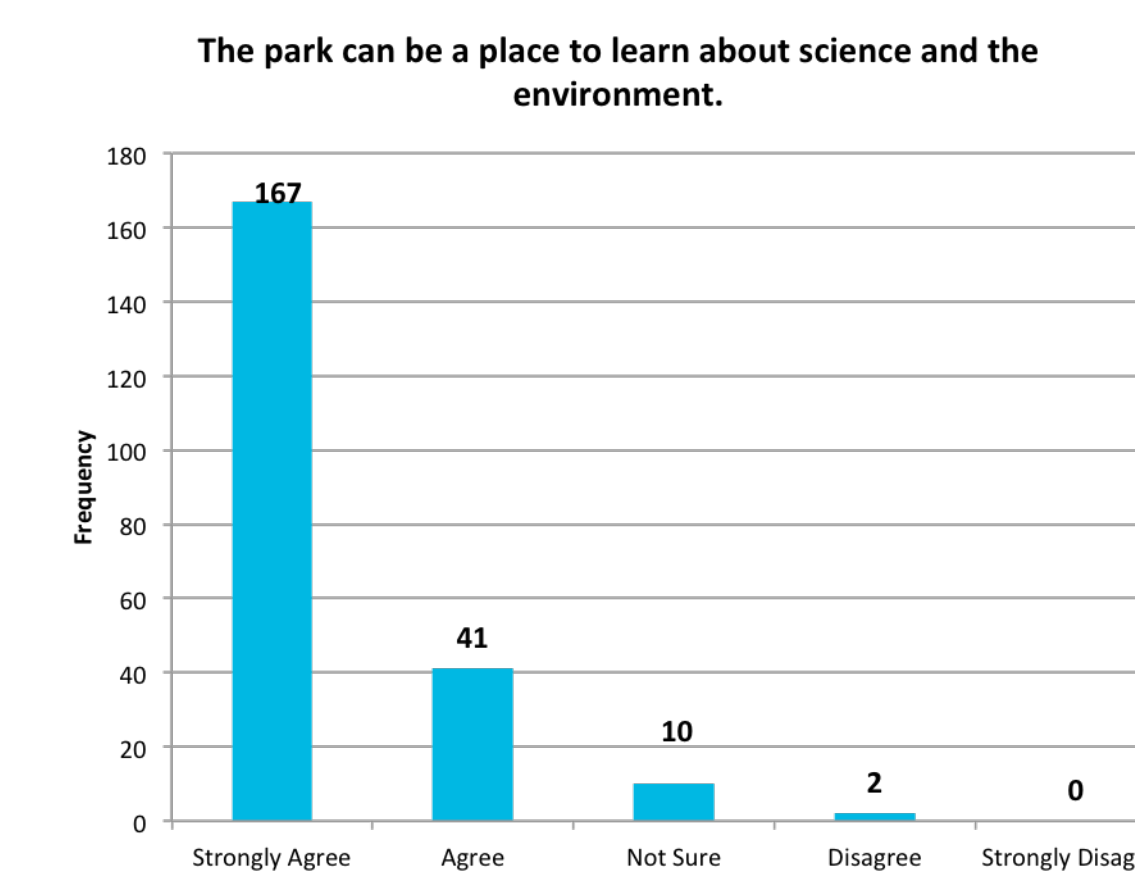


Figure 6. Most respondents agreed that the park could be place to learn about science and the environment.

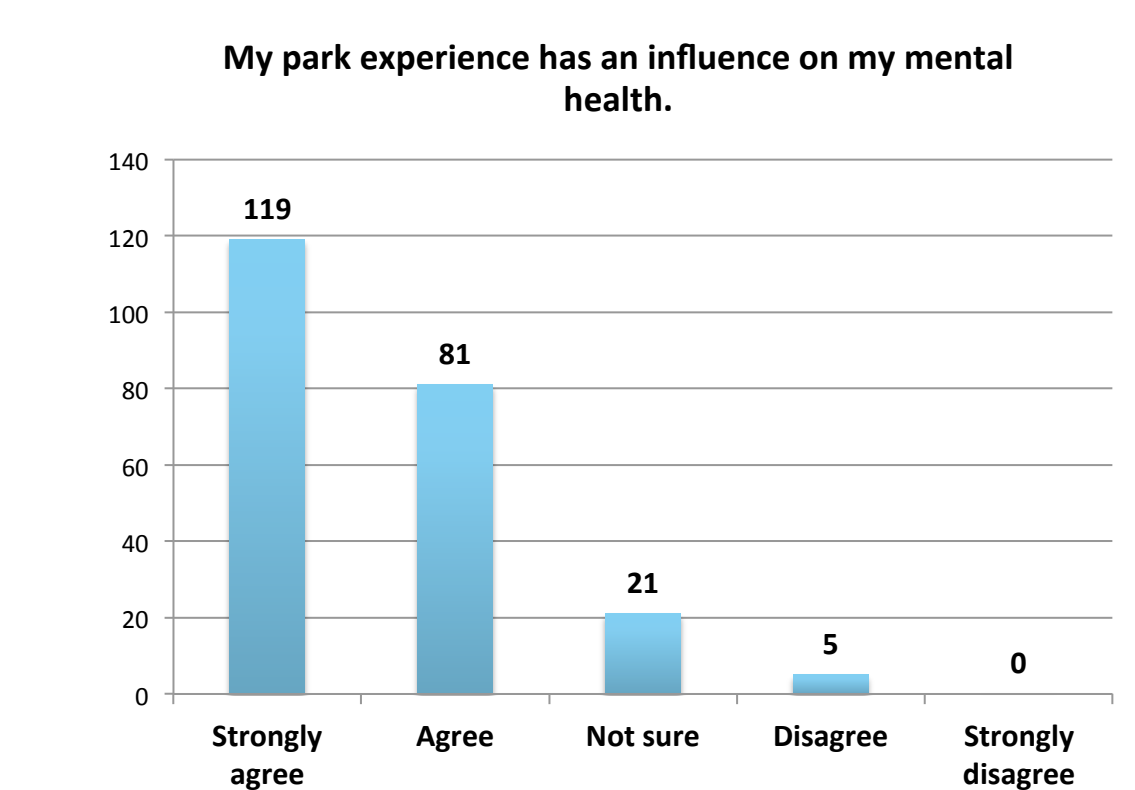


Figure 7. Most respondents agreed that the park had an influence on their mental health.

Implications & Future Research

The pilot study is an important preliminary step to the extensive, longitudinal survey to ensure that a rigorous and reliable instrument is developed. Following the pilot study, a longer, more comprehensive study will be implemented that will (i) capture a much larger participant sample size which is key in obtaining significant quantitative findings; (ii) collect data during two different seasonal time points, important for capturing temporal differences in park usage and accessibility; and (iii) allow the research team enough time in between data collection points to have the opportunity to review findings thus far and pursue additional lines of questioning.

Pilot results were presented at a December, 2014 Board meeting of the Baldwin Hills Conservancy. Feedback from members was elicited at this time. A focus group of all research assistants was also held to collect input from the field team on how to improve the comprehensive study. The BHC Board was enthusiastic about the results and rigor of the pilot study. This feedback allowed us to change the survey questions and some of the methods, including the use of tablets to collect electronic surveys instead of unwieldy stacks of paper.

Future efforts will be focused on expanding the scope and scale of the survey assessment and visitation rates determination. Visitation rates can ultimately be determined throughout the span of the day or year. Future evaluative questions will be better targeted to more concretely understand the **significance** of the Baldwin Hills' park resources throughout its connected neighborhoods and communities. Additionally, demographic information on the race, ethnicity, sex and religion of park visitors would be collected in order to assess the equitable accessibility of the urban park resources amongst different cultural groups.

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