A RESEARCH BRIEF

2024

Nature and Health Practitioner Needs Assessment

Investigating organizational capacity to leverage science for impact

A report by the Collective for Nature Immersion Science and Practice at CSU

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HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF NATURAL RESOURCES
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Executive Summary

In this report, we outline the findings of a needs assessment conducted with organizations working in the field of nature and health. The goal of this survey was to better understand the work being done by nature and health organizations across the U.S., and how the research community can better support this work. To do this, we 1) assessed current use of scientific evidence to guide programming, 2) assessed capacity needs for using science to increase and evaluate impact, and 3) identified opportunities for practitioner and scientist collaboration.

Our results indicate that organizations are relying on a wide variety of outdoor programming to achieve a diverse set of health and well-being benefits. A high proportion of organizations are familiar with the scientific evidence around nature and health, but need to know more about how to translate scientific evidence into program design, facilitation, and assessment. In the following pages, we discuss this data in greater detail, synthesize our results, and identify next steps for our need assessment and the field of nature and health more broadly.

This report is part of a larger needs assessment being conducted with researchers and practitioners and is supported by the REI Cooperative Action Fund.

Introduction

The Collective for Nature Immersion Science and Practice (cNISP) exists **to increase the capacity of nature-based programming to support happier, healthier, and more sustainable communities.** We do this by facilitating collaboration and co-learning between practitioners and researchers working at the intersection of nature and human health and well-being.

To ensure our work actually meets the needs of practitioners and researchers across the country, we are conducting an extensive needs assessment. This report outlines the results from phase 1 of this assessment. This data, in addition to other phases in our needs assessment, will guide the creation of professional development curricula to help practitioners better leverage scientific evidence in their work. We will also use this data to make recommendations for researchers about what types of reserach studies might best meet the needs of organizations working to improve community health and well-being by connecting folks to nature.

Methods

To conduct the needs assessment, we administered a survey to organizations from across the U.S. working to encourage people to get outside to improve their health and well-being. The survey was advertised to organizations in a variety of ways, such as listservs, organizational newsletters, and direct requests to colleagues and collaborators in our network. In total, 218 organizations participated in the survey. Out of the 218 organizations, 120 completed the full survey. We asked organizations about the scope of their work (geographic and thematic), their current familiarity and use of science in their programming, evaluation efforts, past collaboration efforts with researchers, and barriers to future collaborations. We analyzed the results using a combination of descriptive statistics for quantitative data and thematic analysis for qualitative data. We outline the results of these questions in the following pages.

Results

Organizational Information

Organizations who participated in our survey came from a variety of sectors. The majority of the organizations were non-profit with a handful of for-profit businesses. We asked about number of part time and full time staff, as a proxy for organization size. On average, organizations had 63.7 full-time staff, and 46 part-time staff, however the standard deviation was 307.2 and 249.9 respectively. These numbers suggest the averages do not provide a meaningful indicator of organization size, but rather there is significant variation in organization size.

Organization by sector

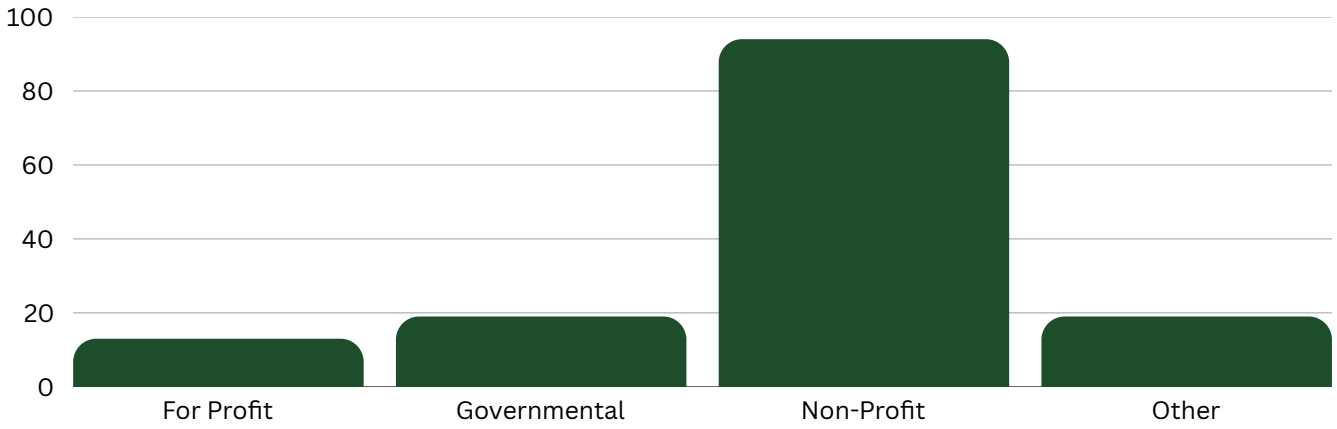
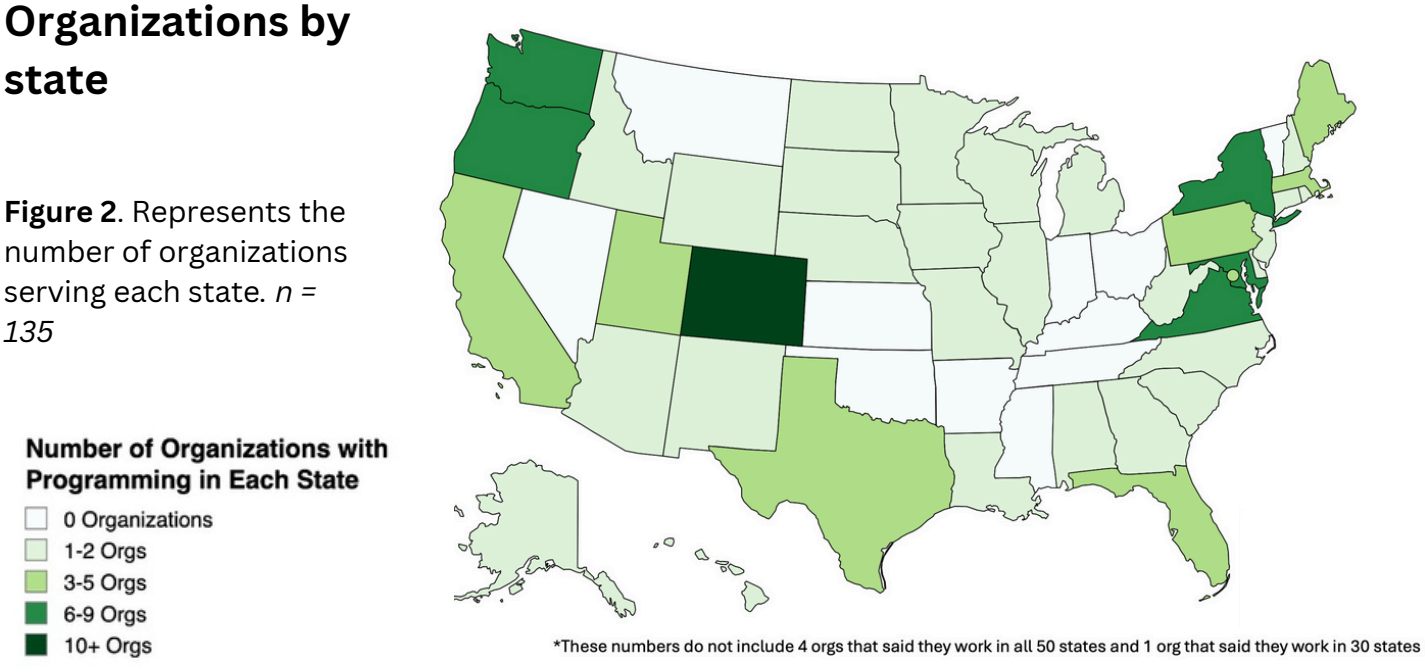


Figure 1. *Organizations were asked to select from a predetermined list of outcomes. n = 124*

Organizations by state

Figure 2. Represents the number of organizations serving each state. *n = 135*



Impacts, Aims & Activities

We collected organizations' desired outcomes of their work, their broader impacts and the types of programming they facilitate. The data indicate organizations facilitate a wide range of programming using nature immersion to reach a variety of health or well-being outcomes. When asked to select the most pertinent health and well-being outcomes, organizations frequently chose emotional/mental health and social outcomes as the most relevant benefits of their work. When describing their desired impact, environmental stewardship, mental and emotional health, social connection, and personal growth were the most prevalent themes.

Intended health and well-being outcomes

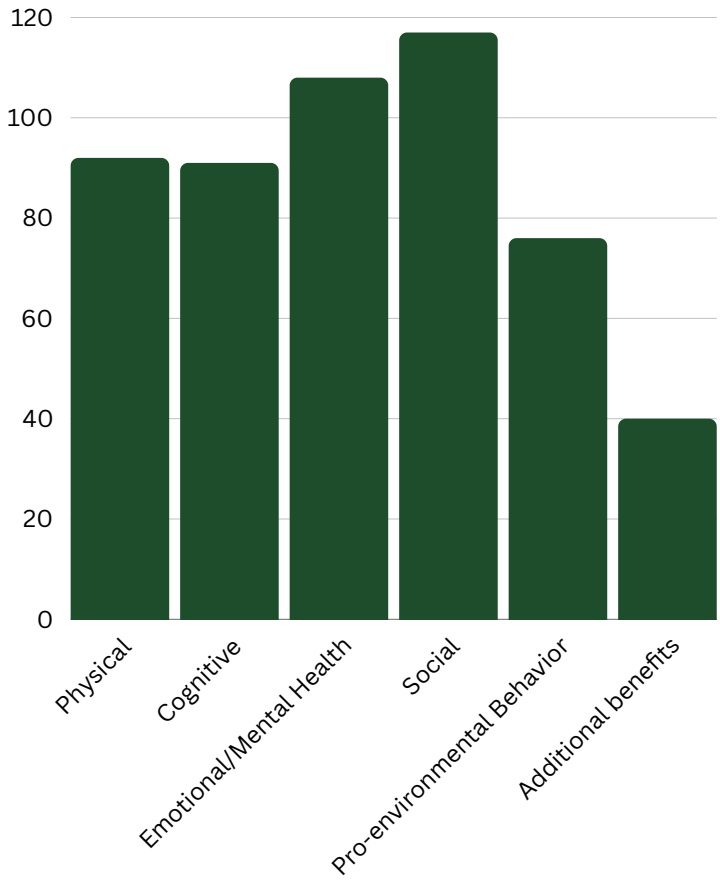


Figure 3. *Organizations were asked to select from a predetermined list of outcomes. n = 125*

Types of intended impacts

Figure 4. *Organizations were asked to describe their intended impact. The data was analyzed to identify common themes and the number of organizations identifying each theme.*

Programming & Activities

We collected organizations' descriptions of the programming or activities they facilitated. Education, recreational activities (such as hiking, biking, or boating) and retreats were the most common forms of programming. Activities that were repeated by a single organization (e.g., "our camp hosts biking for children and biking for teens") were only counted once. However, different types of activities or programs in the same organization were counted as distinct.

Figure 5. *Organizations were asked to describe their programming. The data was analyzed to identify common themes and the number of organizations identifying each theme.*

Populations Served

Responding organizations identified a wide variety of populations served by their programming. The figure below differentiates the population groups, and the number of organizations that serve each group.

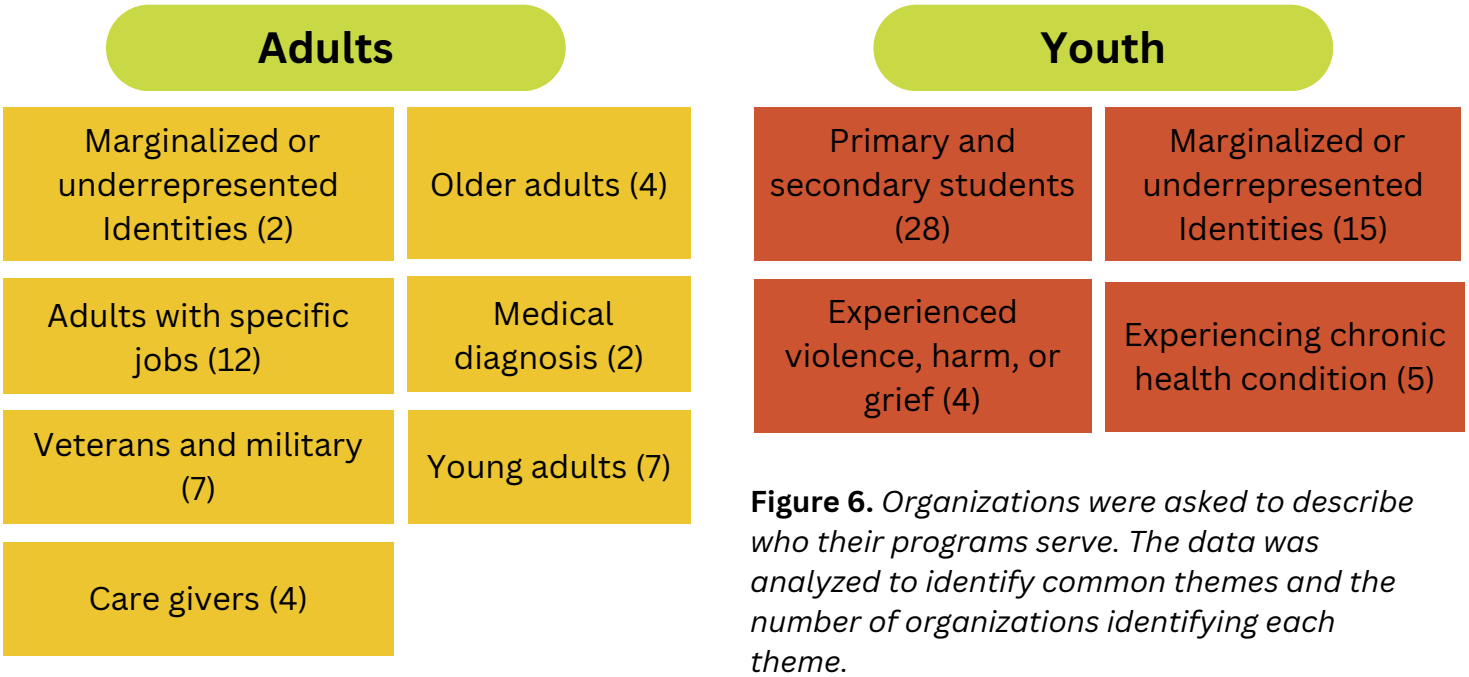


Figure 6. *Organizations were asked to describe who their programs serve. The data was analyzed to identify common themes and the number of organizations identifying each theme.*

Evidence-Based Programming

The next series of questions we asked were focused on how organizations use scientific evidence. We first asked organizations how familiar they were with the science documenting the health and well-being benefits of nature immersion. The majority of organizations (82%) indicated familiarity with the science. However, when asked if they 'knew everything' about the science, a significant number (40%) disagreed, implying there is room for knowledge gains and development resources.

"Our organization is familiar with scientific evidence documenting the health and well-being benefits of time spent in nature"

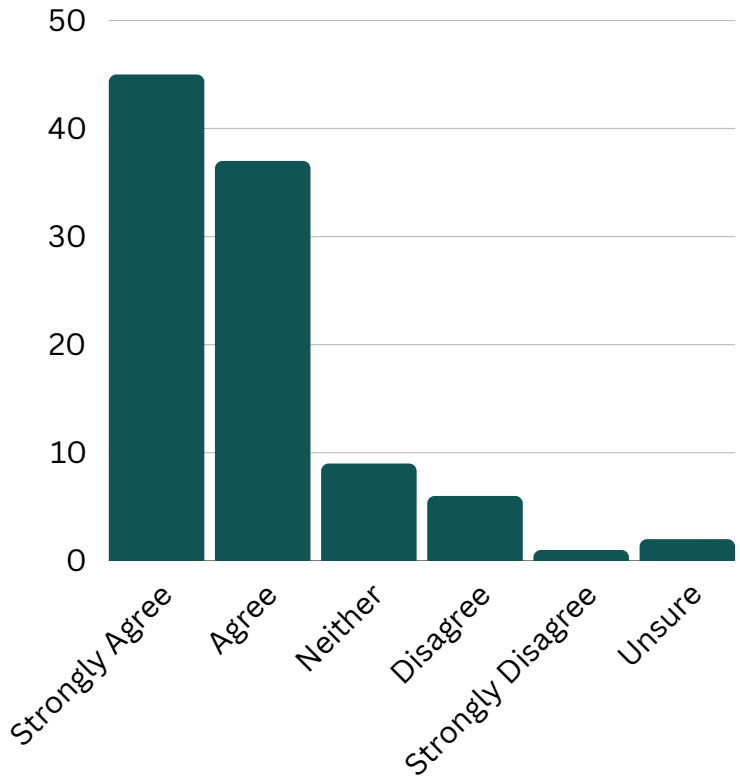


Figure 7. *Organizations were asked to rate their familiarity with nature and health science. n = 100*

"Our organization knows everything we need to know about the science documenting the health and well-being benefits of time spent in nature"

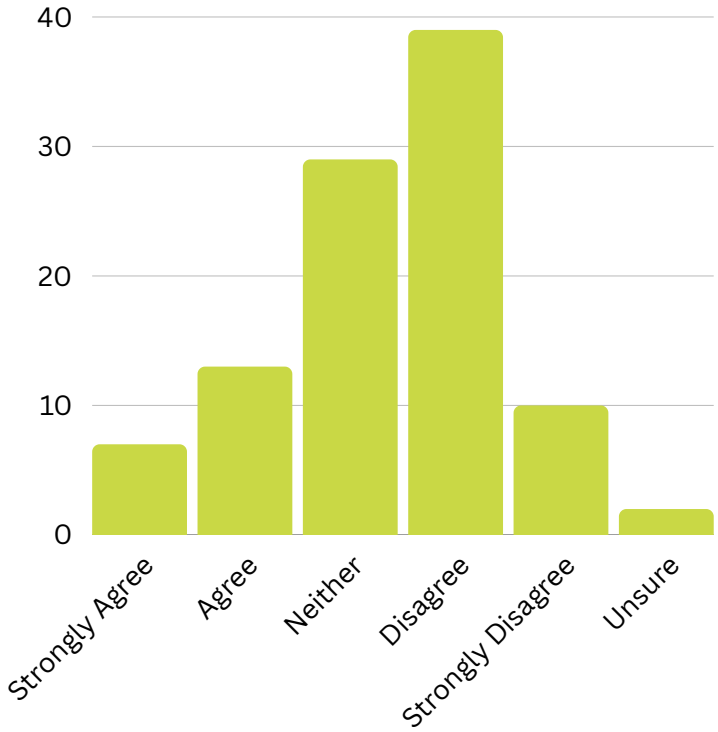


Figure 8. *Organizations were asked to rate their need for more information about nature and health science. n = 100*

How organizations use scientific evidence

We also asked organizations how they use scientific evidence. Most of the organizations reported using scientific evidence to design their programs and communicate with participants.

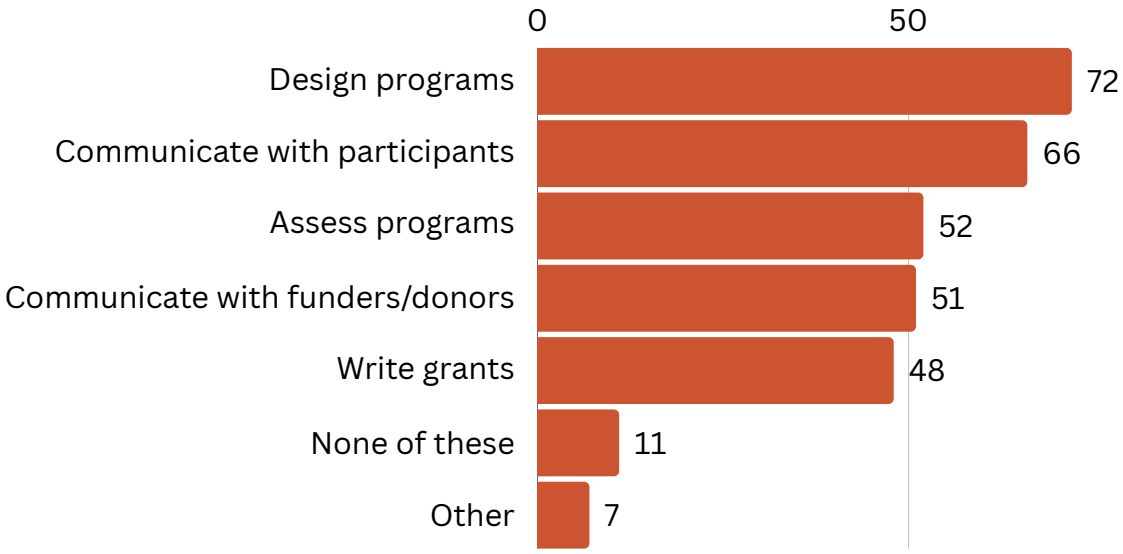


Figure 9. *Organizations were asked to select from a predetermined list of uses. n = 98*

Where organizations get their scientific evidence

We asked organizations where they access scientific evidence. Organizations most often get their scientific evidence via secondary sources (such as resources from organizations like the Children and Nature Network or professional associations), some accessed evidence directly via peer-reviewed literature, and a few organizations communicated directly with researchers about the evidence.

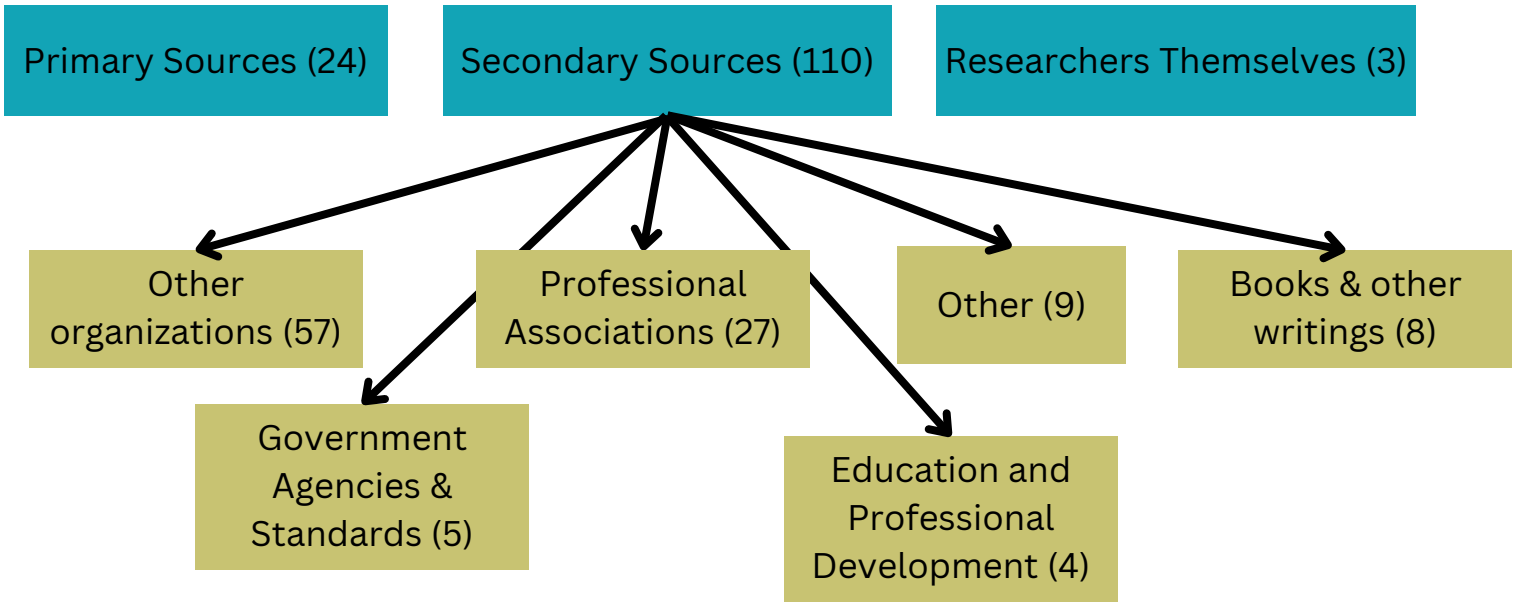


Figure 10. *Organizations were asked to describe where they accessed scientific evidence. The data was analyzed to identify common themes and the number of organizations identifying each theme.*

Program Assessments

In addition to use of scientific evidence, we asked organizations to respond to a series of questions about if and how they assess their programming. Ninety-seven percent of responding organizations indicated that they did assess their programming. Overall, organizations rely heavily on participant counts, testimonies, and pre-and post-surveys as tools to gather assessment data. When this data is collected, it is most often used for program planning and design, communicating with donors, and grant writing and reporting.

How organizations are assessing impact

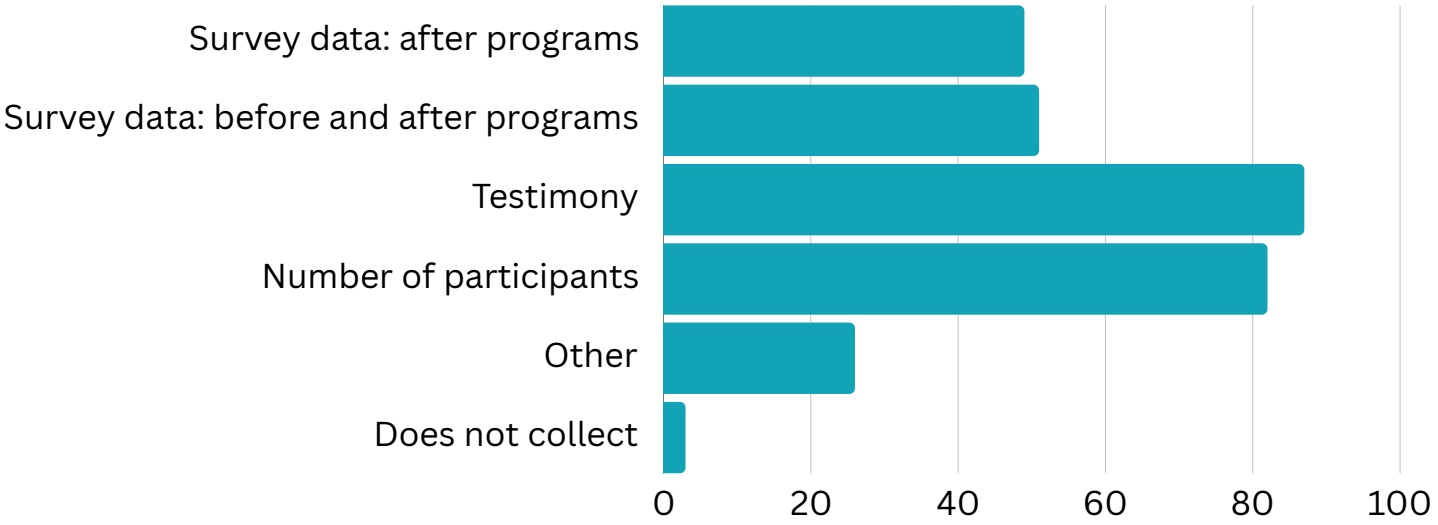


Figure 11. *Organizations were asked to select from a predetermined list of assessment types. n = 98*

How organizations use their assessment data

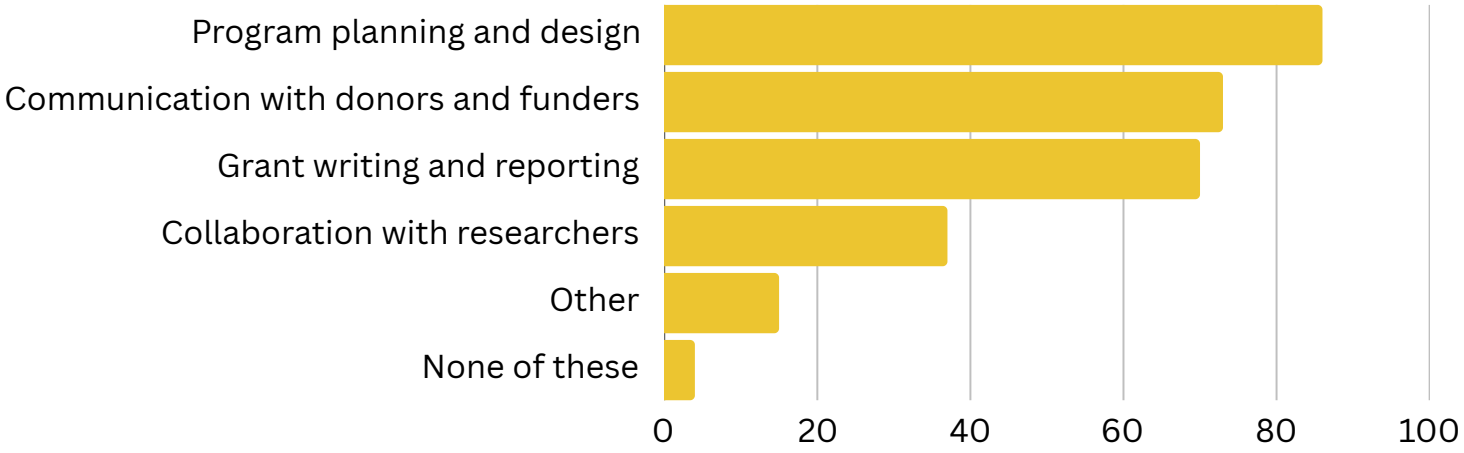


Figure 12. *Organizations were asked to select from a predetermined list of uses. n = 98*

Finally, we asked organizations about their confidence in their assessments and what types of information or resources would be helpful to support the further development of their program assessment efforts. Organizations' confidence in accuracy of their program assessment was varied and they articulated the need for various type of resources and capacity building tools.

Confidence in assessment

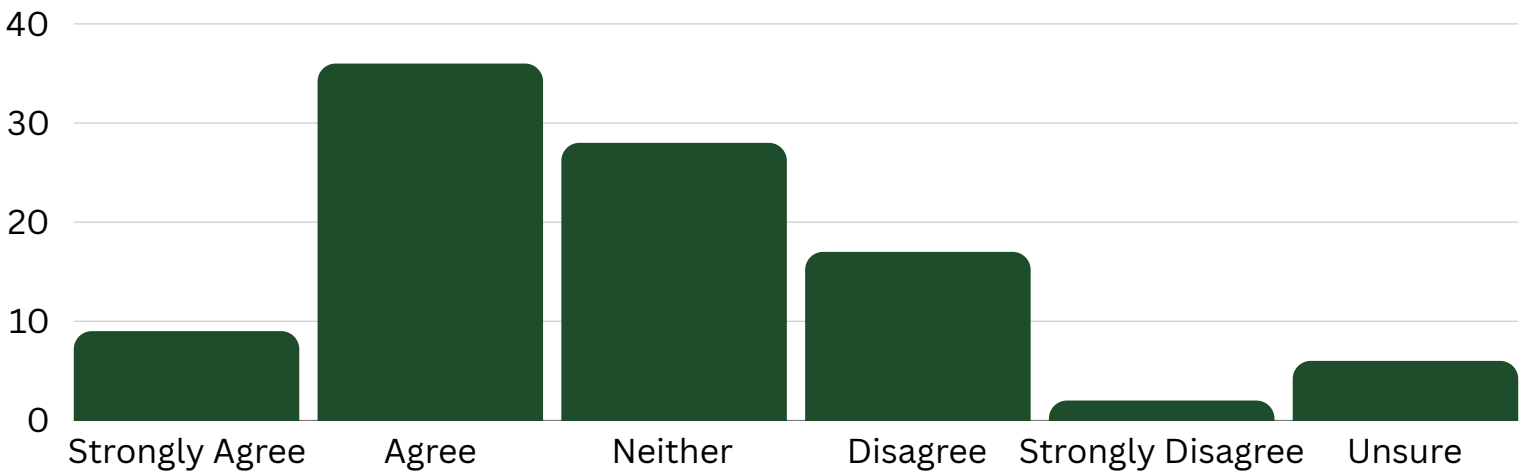


Figure 13. *Organizations were asked to rate their confidence in the accuracy of their assessment data. n = 98*

Types of support and resources that would improve impact assessment

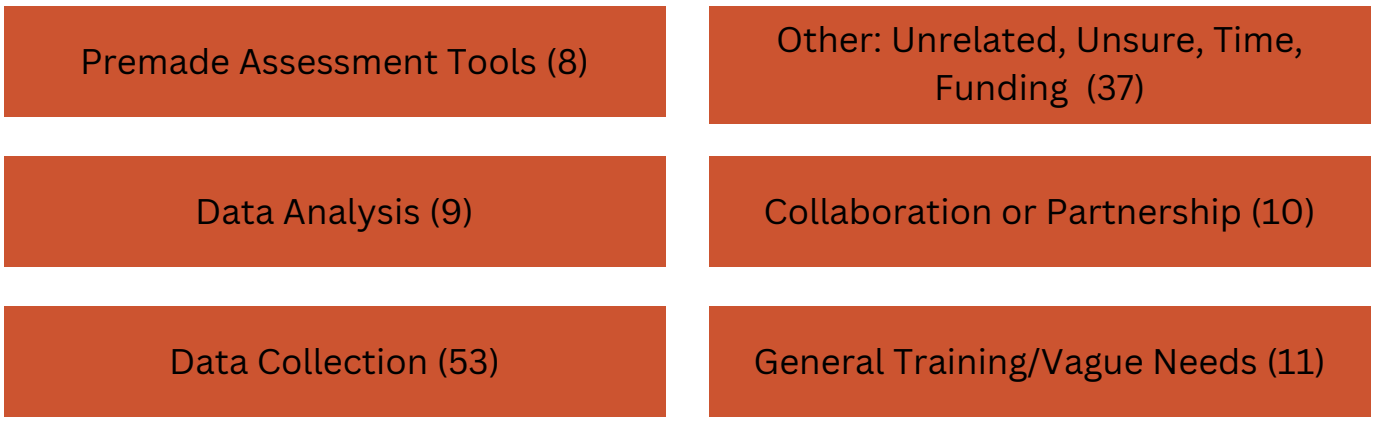


Figure 14. *Organizations were asked to describe what tools and resources would improve their assessments. The data was analyzed to identify common themes and the number of organizations identifying each theme.*

Researcher/Practitioner Collaborations

Our needs assessment also investigated previous experience with and future relevancy of collaborations between researchers and practitioner organizations. Approximately 36% of organizations had previously collaborated with an academic researcher, and 23% had worked with an evaluation consultant to conduct program assessments.

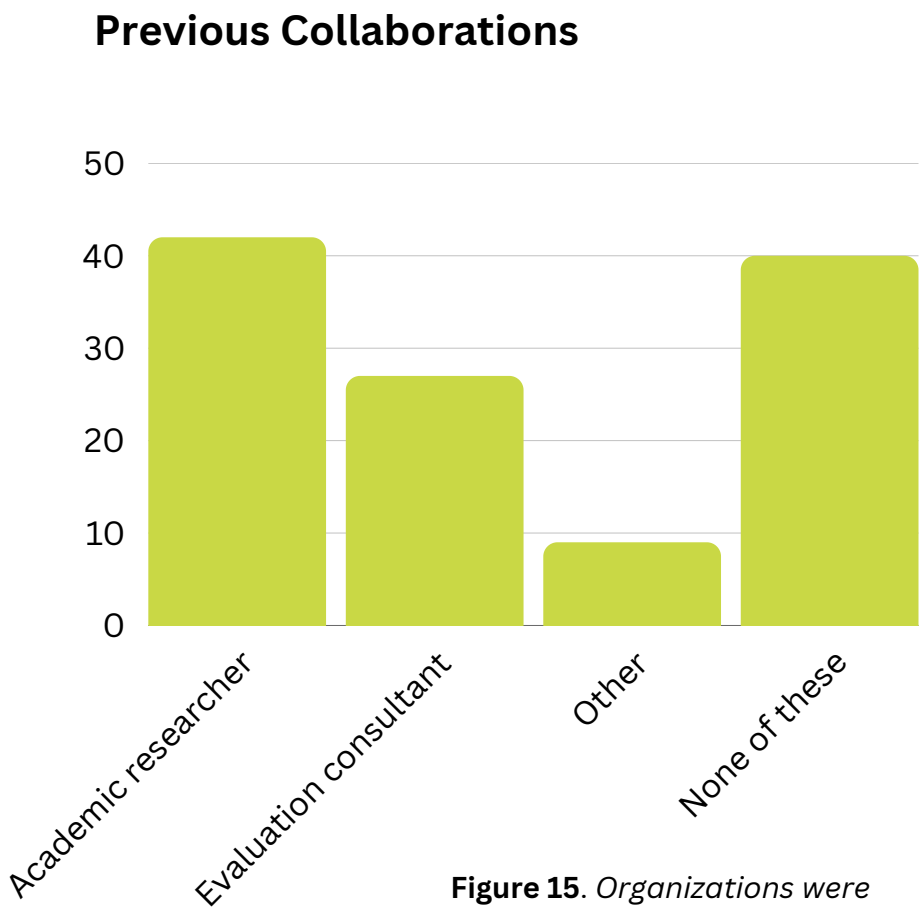


Figure 15. *Organizations were asked to select from a predetermined list of assessment collaborators. n = 98*

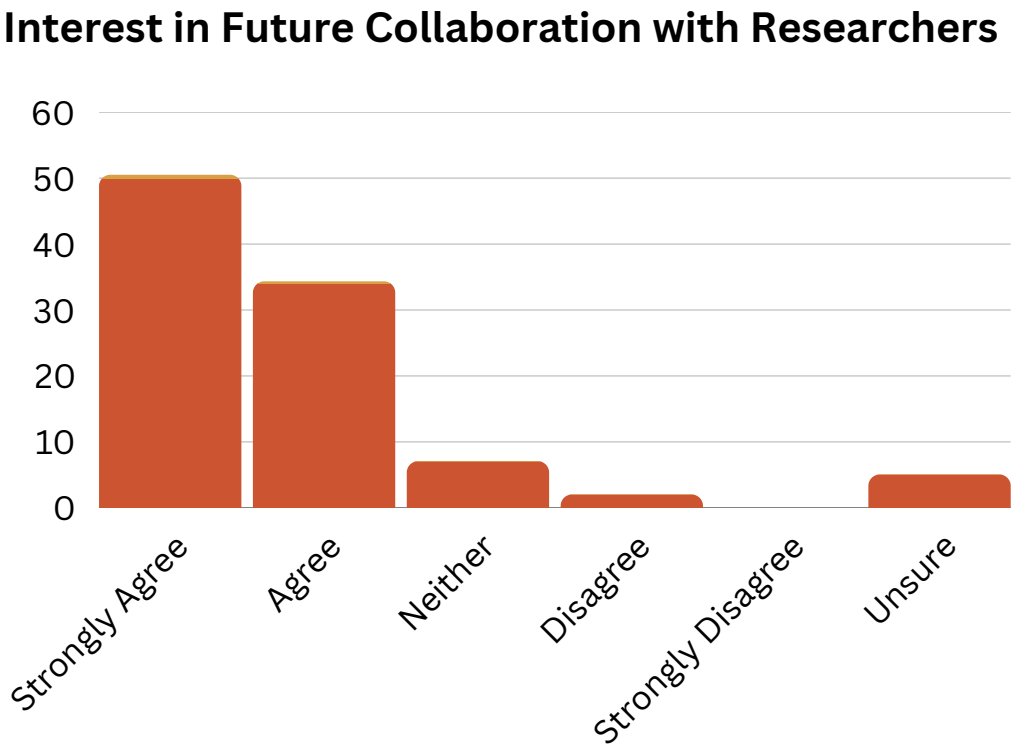


Figure 16. *Organizations were asked to rate their interest in collaborating with researchers. n = 98*

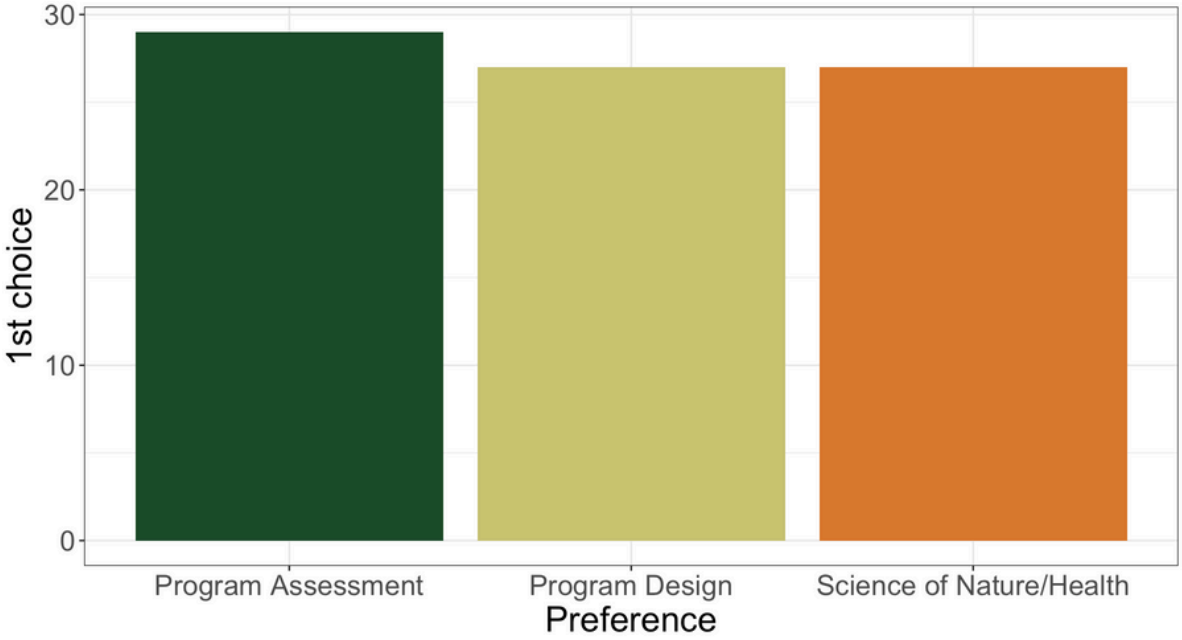
Next, we wanted to find out whether organizations were interested in future collaboration with researchers to document the health and well-being benefits of spending time in nature. Eighty-five percent of respondents expressed interest in collaborating with researchers in the future.

Interest in Training and Capacity Building

The final section of our survey asked about interest in capacity building and future training. Ninety-seven percent of respondents indicated interest in training focused on program assessments and scientific evidence. We also presented various content options for said training. Organizations identified training focused on using scientific evidence to design and facilitate programs as most important, but that was closely followed by program assessment and introductions to scientific evidence. While the preferred format for such training was virtual (38%), many organizations indicated a preference for hybrid (33%) or in person training (29%).

Preferred Training Content

Figure 17. Organizations were asked to rank their preference for training content. The graph shows the number of times each option was ranked as a 'first choice'. *n = 83*



Preferred Training Format

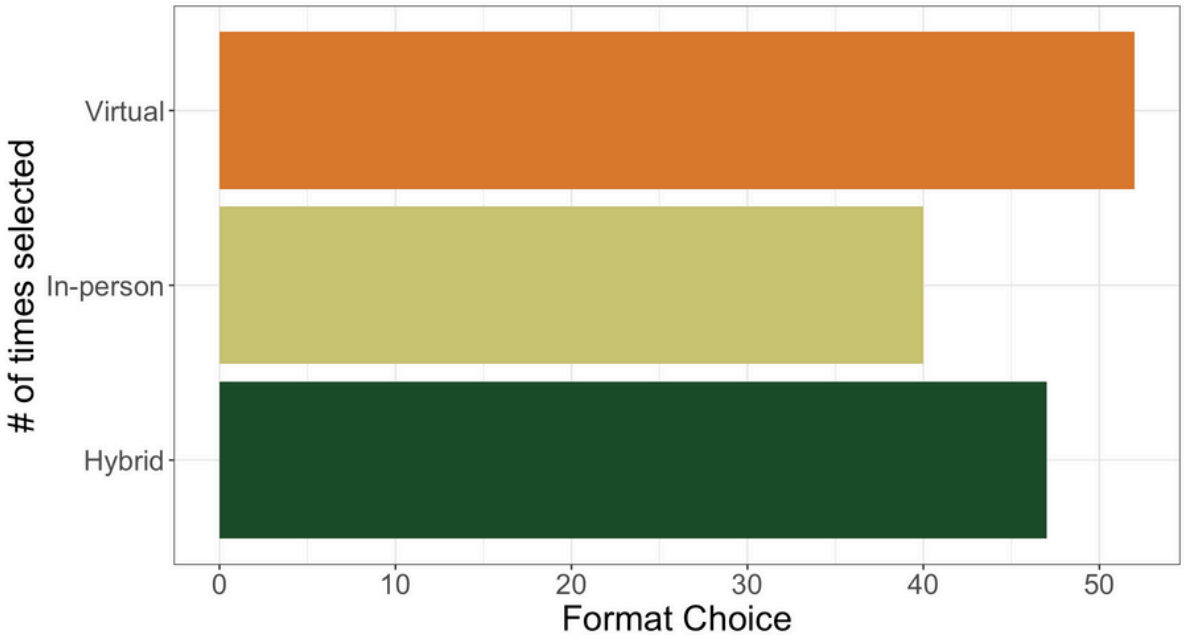


Figure 18. *Organizations were asked to select their preferred format for future trainings. n = 91*

Implications and Next Steps

The synthesis of the data from our survey with nature and health practitioners points to important strengths and gaps in practitioners' capacity to leverage scientific evidence to enhance program impact. This data is just the first step in a broader needs assessment with both practitioners and researchers. However, it has some important implications for both practice and research in the field of nature, health, and well-being.

- **Practitioners are relying on a wide variety of outdoor programming to achieve a diverse set of health and well-being benefits.** This diversity in activities and outcomes underscores the importance of conducting research that investigates a similar variety of health and well-being indicators, and contexts.

- Results indicates that a **high proportion of practitioners are familiar with the scientific evidence around nature and health** and are engaging in program assessment, **but express a need for how to translate such scientific evidence** into program design, facilitation, and assessment.

- **Secondary sources – or places like professional newsletters and books - play an important role in getting scientific evidence into the hands of practitioners**. This highlights the need for effective science communication, beyond that of primary peer-reviewed publications.

In addition to key takeaways, this data identifies remaining questions and next steps for our needs assessment. For example, while we know practitioners self-report a high level of familiarity with the scientific evidence, we do not have a clear understanding of which types of evidence (i.e., physical health outcomes, mental health outcomes, pro-environmental behavior, etc.) they are most familiar with and what they see as implications for practice. Additionally, most organizations indicated an interest in collaborating with researchers, but criteria for effective collaborations and strategies for addressing barriers are important questions for our future work.

It is important to note the geographic bias in the organizations who responded to our survey. We are a Colorado-based reserach group, and as a result, a high proportion of the organizations that responded were located and served communities in Colorado. In the next phases of our assessment, we hope to engage more organizations working to serve a more diverse set of communities and geographies across the country.

Next steps in our needs assessment include:

- A complementary needs assessment survey with nature and health researchers
- Interviews with both practitioners and researchers
- Developing and delivering trainings and resources that aim to increase the capacity of practitioners to use scientific evidence in their programming
- Empirical research on topics and issues most relevant to organizations doing the 'on the ground' work of nature immersion and human health and well-being

Interested in learning about the next phases of our assessment and resource development? Visit our website!