April 28, 2020

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Subject: Special consideration for recreational pressures on waterfront parks and beaches during the warmer months

Dear Leadership,

The unprecedented crisis of COVID-19 presents one of the greatest challenges the outdoor community has faced in a generation – how to balance the recreational needs of millions of metropolitan residents amid social distancing requirements in highly urbanized recreational areas. The coming warmer months and potential for extreme heat this summer make the challenge even greater.

We write to encourage the development of strong policies and programs that limit transmission of this deadly disease while maintaining the mental and physical health benefits that come from access to waterfront areas and beaches.

Our greatest concern is that shelter-in-place requirements and the closure of recreational outlets such as New York City’s public pools, will put extreme summer pressure on our region’s waterfront parks and beaches. The recognition of impacts on underserved communities is critical. These are communities who may not have the means to respond to this crisis and who
may not be able to afford air conditioning or other means to stay cool in cramped, multi-family buildings including public housing, NYCHA complexes and City subsidized housing.

The waterfront and our beaches will be subject to the legitimate needs of millions of people requiring access to fresh air, open space, and access to the water. We urge you to therefore recognize the unique role and benefits of waterfront areas and beaches and we urge you to maximize efforts and education for safe recreation. This letter provides a series of recommendations for your consideration.

**Education**

In these unprecedented times, we recommend an interagency commitment to major, multi-pronged and extensive educational efforts focused on communicating risks, behavior change, and safety. For example, information on the basics of safe recreation in multiple languages – information such as always maintaining 6-feet distances when outdoors, always wearing masks even when running, no gatherings, no group play, solitary heavy exercise only – should be easy to find and easily seen on signs at all waterfront and beach recreation areas. A special emphasis should be placed on how important it is to not enter the water due to the risk of drowning along the waterfront, such as for example along waterfront access areas on the fast-moving East River.

We recommend the placement of educational signs in as many locations as possible including in beach and waterfront parking lots, on bike paths, at obscure and hidden park entrances, along streets where overflow may take place, and in other areas where people can or might access the waterfront and beaches.

There should be a major increase in the placement of red 6-foot social distancing signs, such as those developed by the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, in all waterfront parks and beaches and at any entrances.

Visual information could be included on any signage that shows what commonly exists in the outdoors as 6 feet in distance. An example is graphically showing that most benches are 6 feet long to demonstrate that if. If two people are sitting across from each other on a bench they are most likely not 6 feet apart.

Education about safe recreation should be disseminated throughout communities and conducted through outreach to community leaders, business improvement districts, schools, community boards, houses of worship, nonprofits, etc. We recommend the extent of this communication be included as a part of New York City’s Community Preparedness newsletter, through Office of Emergency Management communication channels, New York City’s ‘Notify NYC’ texting program, and other existing public outreach programs. Communication and education early, often, and from community members to community members is paramount. In addition, we recommend agencies reach out to the operators and owners of privately owned public waterfront space to share information on safe recreation and to coordinate where possible.

**Visitor Management**

We recommend publicizing and emphasizing the voluntary timing of visits to parks and waterfront areas. For example, consider creating priority times in waterfront areas for seniors, first responders, essential services employees, and medical professionals. Encourage these
visitors to wear designated colors such as red, pink, yellow, and orange at those times to help reinforce this voluntary action.

Consider closing dense picnic areas or plan to manage crowds near picnic areas. Solutions could include removal of picnic tables and benches or the placement of picnic tables at greater distances. For areas where socially distant picnicking cannot be managed, consider using closed parts of parking lots for socially distant picnicking.

Beach parking lots, such as the Riis Beach, Canarsie Pier and Beach 95th Street, Beach 11th to Beach 15th parking areas/lots should be limited to allow for cars to spread out and to limit the number of visitors. Unused parking areas, especially at Riis Beach and Canarsie Pier, could be used for socially distanced family recreation such as picnicking.

Visitation could be limited by a number of means including establishing online parking lot reservation systems, using Twitter and other social media outlets to notify visitors about capacity exceedances, and conducting education and outreach that encourages people to come to the beach and waterfront parks at off-peak times such as mornings and weekdays. In addition, reservation systems could limit visitation to three hours per visit.

To manage the density of beachgoers in popular areas, we recommend promoting visitation in historically unused parts of beaches, particularly at Rockaway Beach. Make portions of the beach a “no swim” beach where sunbathing is allowed to reduce density in lifeguarded areas and to limit the need for staffing lifeguards in “no swim” areas.

Access to the Rockaway and Riis Beach boardwalks should be limited to passive recreation. Agency staff should monitor foot traffic on the boardwalk and adjust management strategies as needed.

We recommend determining ways food concessionaires can remain open by requiring contactless and touchless food ordering, contactless delivery systems, and maximizing distances when queuing.

**Protection of natural resources and park assets**

Information and education about how to protect the environment and wildlife, such as packing in and packing out, disposing of gloves and masks, and leaving wildlife alone is critical. A strong effort to reduce trash from improper mask and glove disposal will likely be required as we see evidence of such improper disposal taking place now throughout urban areas.

Volunteer programs are a critical part of the management of natural resources and park assets. We recommend the development of protocols for volunteer activities that allow for critical volunteer events to take place such as beach clean ups. Several park partners are currently developing solutions and could be relied upon for collaboration on the development of standard volunteer program protocols.

If parks are closed, surveillance and enforcement will likely be needed to monitor illegal activities such as fires in remote areas, trespassing, biking on hiking trails, dogs off leashes where not allowed, or graffiti and vandalism. Shared and cross-jurisdictional enforcement and enforcement capacity will likely be necessary.
Staff Safety
We greatly appreciate the on-the-ground staff of all our park agencies, who before this crisis worked hard to keep waterfront parks and beaches clean and accessible. The pandemic now requires additional effort and resources. We support the prioritization of efforts to ensure that parks staff can deliver education, manage visitors, and protect natural resources while taking measures for their own safety. The sourcing of personal protective equipment (PPE) for parks staff should be integrated into planning and budgets for the warm months. Interagency sharing of staffing capacity and resources such as PPE is strongly encouraged.

Closures
If waterfront and beach closures must be required, we request any closure decision is balanced against the possibility of extreme heat this summer and the distance urban residents must travel to access not just open space, but cooler open space.

We believe waterfront areas and beaches should only be considered for closure on a case-by-case basis if education or enforcement fails, or if park employee safety cannot be assured. If possible, we recommend holding off on the complete closure of beaches and pools for the entire summer until there is a better understanding of factors related to the containment of the disease.

We must realize that full closure of most waterfront park and beaches is not possible. Lifeguards should be present even if beaches are closed as people will likely find ways to enter by foot or by bike and attempt to swim. Consider the placement of red 6-foot distancing signs and red “no swim” flags long beaches every 15 to 20 yards along beach shorelines to discourage swimming even if entrances and parking lots are closed or barricaded.

Closed waterfront areas and beaches will require a significant enforcement presence to prevent entry. For access to the National Park Service and Rockaway beaches, it will likely be necessary to ask NYC Ferry operators keep in place the current essential-worker-only travel restriction. Beach closure information should be placed along bike routes and in buses, and modifications to some bus service should be considered.

In the event of waterfront park and beach closures, interagency coordination is needed for street closures to provide access to the open air with a priority placed on significant closures near heavily used waterfront parks.

Interagency coordination and collaboration
Finally, we strongly recommend a partnership and resource sharing between the National Park Service, New York State, and New York City with a commitment to share resources, coordinate educational efforts, coordinate any closures, and to ensure enforcement. In the event some waterfront parks and beaches are closed, and others are open, there will be excessive gathering and overflow in areas that remain open.

In conclusion we appreciate the difficulty of managing incompatible goals in an environment of limited scientific data and resources. The recommendations in this letter, therefore, are provided with a great deal of regard for the leadership each of you has shown to date and we thank you for your efforts.
We look forward to your comments or answering any questions you have.

Sincerely,

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