

The importance of using parks for physical activity- Niterói- RJ

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ABSTRACT

The theme of green areas, parks, squares and public spaces, as components of urban design, is a means of expressing culture and customs, directing this quality to sport is to take advantage of society's interests and guarantee the usefulness of the designed scenarios, the valorization, protection and conservation of the furniture and elements arranged in parks and spaces. This work was carried out through observational research, with the aim of emphasizing and reflecting on the environmental benefits provided by green areas in the urban space and their contributions to the population's quality of life through a perceptual analysis. Based on this premise, studies that discuss the importance of these areas in the urban space are extremely important, as are reflections on the importance of municipal planning and public policies in building environmentally healthy and sustainable cities. In this way, practicing physical activity in parks and other public spaces in the city of Niterói-RJ not only means physical and mental health, but also having a quality of life that is in harmony with various factors and not just one specific one.

Keywords: Physical activity; Environmental quality; Green areas.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Public spaces have been studied from various disciplines with different approaches, among which there are some consistent indications that allow a space to be classified as public. The traditional characteristics of urban public spaces can be seen in [1] which states:

Public space is a place not limited by property rights, accessible to all, in which collective behavior is experienced and public life is expressed in its various manifestations. Public space is understood as the entire system of streets, avenues, squares, sidewalks, parks, gardens, among others, that make up the city, which should be understood as a collective good and interpreted as spaces where society exchanges with its city, where the interests and needs of the community are met.

This conception of public space as a set of urban infrastructure contains the elements that Silva [2] proposes as characteristics of public space, i.e. public domain, collective use and multifunctionality; another characteristic drawn from humanist phenomenological geography is heterogeneity, With these four characteristics, public space can also be approached as a lived and felt space according to Lefebvre [3] who studied how regions, such as cities and neighborhoods, are socially constructed from the knowledge of their users' meanings.

Residents and users attribute meaning to valued public spaces and everyday places in their daily lives [4]. Meanings and values can represent a reconfiguration of the connection between the user, time and public space, according to their experiences, participation and appropriation of the space.

One of the main points of public spaces concerns their use and the practice of various activities in these places. Previous physical activity intervention research has focused mainly on psychosocial approaches to behavior change through theories such as the Health Belief Model, the Theory of Planned Behavior and Social Cognitive Theory [5].

The interventions and practices derived from these theories have focused on motivating, educating and/or supporting the individual to become or remain physically active. These physical activity interventions can include hiring a personal trainer, creating slogans or health promotional ads aimed at encouraging an individual's physical

activity practice. While these models have guided effective interventions, important limitations to an individualistic approach include lack of adherence, sustainability and population reach [6].

Parks, squares and sports and recreational activities were premised on the belief that national and municipal parks would preserve natural resources and that public parks would increase the livability of communities. Although today's parks are increasingly associated with physical health.

It is important to recognize that parks and recreational services also offer many other health benefits, including positive individual, social, economic and environmental impacts. For example, the presence of open space and a natural setting can increase positive psychological, emotional and mental health [7].

As a contribution to studies on the subject, the aim of this article is to show the importance of using urban parks and squares for sports in the municipality of Niterói (RJ), as well as to point out how users make use of urban parks and squares and to analyze quality of life, together with the goals set for the objective of health and well-being established by the UN1.

II. METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out in the municipality of Niterói, RJ, where an observational study with qualitative characteristics was carried out, since aspects related to the quality of life of the city's residents were observed, to survey the use of space for physical activities.

A visit to the city was made and the practice of physical activity in various locations in the city of Niterói was investigated, regarding the activities carried out by the population, between the period from April 18, 2023 to May 25, 2023, at different times such as the morning, afternoon and evening. The movement of people practicing various sports activities was observed in different areas such as parks, squares and beach areas. Notes were taken of these observations.

By observing the spaces, notes were made about the infrastructure, the flow of people, whether there are basic operating conditions, such as toilets, security, outdoor gyms or any other items common to parks, squares and streets with good architecture. In addition, some photographic records were taken to document aspects and characteristics of these spaces.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This research aimed to show the relationship between parks, health and well-being, seeking to better understand this subject of study, to recognize the benefits most commonly associated with urban and non-urban parks, as well as to raise the challenges facing the effective use of the potential of parks to promote health, well-being and quality of life in society.

The sites analyzed in Niterói included various spaces that are widely used by the population, given that it is a small municipality, so there are not many official spaces that are indicated by the management as being geared towards sports or leisure in general.

The characteristics of the places chosen are described below, such as the Icaraí beachfront, which is about 2 km long and is one of the city's main streets, with complete infrastructure. Along the avenue you can see the presence of decks to enjoy the landscape formed by the beach.

The beach has several shops, such as restaurants and snack bars, supermarkets, pharmacies and bars. Asphalt can be seen all along the avenue, as well as sidewalks.

In the busiest part, approximately in the middle of the avenue, the promenade is wider and in good condition, since the part where there is the greatest concentration of people is the seafront promenade, and the Inga Square, which consists of an extensive open area with infrastructure for small events, has garbage cans, a walking track, a lawn in good condition, among other aspects that make the place suitable for sports by the local population (Figure 1 and 2).

Figure 1 - Ingá Square

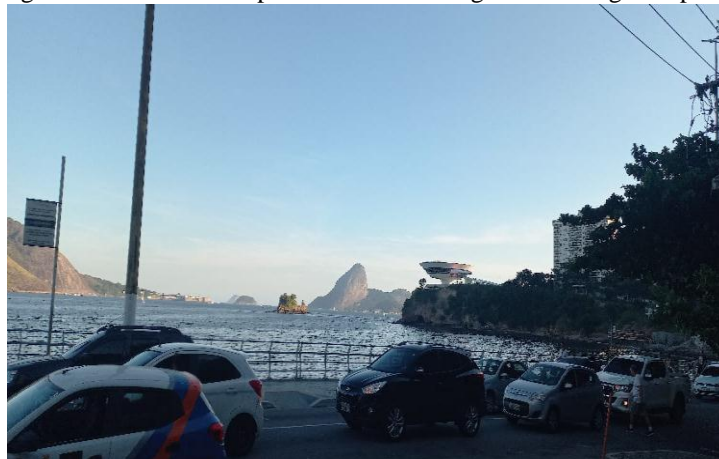


Source: SECONSER (2023)

Through these observations, it was possible to identify the ways in which public parks are used, in this case Inga Square, and an avenue, making it possible to point out whether there is a focus on physical activity in these areas, whether there are sports equipment or any other sports-oriented feature.

This observation also made it possible to point out the characteristics of these spaces, as some of the physical aspects of these locations have already been described, making it possible to make an association between the practice of sport and the environment in which it takes place, thus discussing the influence of the environment on sporting activities in the city.

Figure 2 - Place where sports such as running and walking take place



Source: Santos, V. (2023)

A closer look at studies on the relationship between parks, health and well-being revealed a focus on parks located in green and natural areas such as beaches and parks and squares in the city of Niterói. According to Romanillos et al. [8], most studies that address the relationship between health and the natural environment are carried out from the perspective of urban green areas and there are few investigations that study the role of protected natural areas.

Given this scenario, a specific look was directed at each of the categories of protected areas considered here: urban and non-urban parks and squares. In this sense, we sought to better understand how the studies were carried out in each case in terms of the research methods adopted and the benefits most investigated and perceived in this observational research.

Partnerships need to be established between protected area professionals and public health authorities in order to more systematically address the health potential of protected areas and ensure that informed decisions are made in all areas of the health system, including treatment, prevention, public use programs and territorial and tourism development policies in the context of urban parks and natural parks [9].

In this sense, research efforts into the real effects of visitation in parks, in terms of the relevance of these areas, existing gaps and the demands of tourists and populations living near these areas, are necessary and strategic. This can justify political and financial support for natural and urban parks and help public agencies,

managers and communities to design integrated public use programs, structure projects aimed at health, well-being, leisure and tourism, as well as communication and relationships with tourists and potential visitors, with a view to ensuring that the full potential of these protected areas is used by society in the broadest sense.

However, it is important to point out how users make use of urban parks and squares and to analyze their perception of the physical and social environment, taking into account the type and level of physical activity and socio-demographic characteristics, in order to present the goal of sustainable development and Health and Well-being, ensuring a healthy life and promoting well-being for all, at all ages, i.e. combating diseases, smoking, premature deaths, road accidents, sparking the idea of quality of life, along with the goals set for the health and well-being goal established by the ON.

From approaching the field of research in question, it was possible to recognize that, in general, much of the existing research still focuses on parks and green areas located in urban centers, privileging aspects related to physical health, disease prevention, restoration through contact with nature and moments of sociability. Other aspects related to the health and well-being of visitors, such as environmental, ecological, cultural, economic and intellectual well-being, are still on the periphery of debates [10] and [9] have pointed out.

When considering only the Brazilian scenario, this is even more evident, as almost all research still looks at parks and urban green areas, with an eye on the contributions to the physical and psychological health of their visitors.

Although many studies focus on evaluating the physical structures and conditions that exist to enable experiences in parks, as well as the benefits associated with visitation, this information generally does not result in practical actions and is still underused by managers, public policy interlocutors and visitors.

Parks have a positive influence on people's self-perception of health and encourage the practice of physical activities, as they provide suitable places for people to walk or run and often have specific facilities for sports, exercise and other activities, offering the opportunity to include physical activities in leisure time free of charge.

Another dimension of well-being highly valued by visitors to urban parks is psychological. Much of the research has indicated that more tranquil, aesthetically pleasing and healthy environments, which bring together species of fauna and flora and fragments of native vegetation, have a restorative and renewing character, seen as an environmental attribute capable of restoring cognitive and functional capacity to minimize the stressful life of the city, involving feelings that express the idea of escape from routine. This debate is directly related to the social benefits, which are also highly valued in studies on urban parks, precisely because they are spaces for meeting and socializing, providing opportunities for family and friends to get to know new people and establish new friendships.

In addition to physical infrastructure and good conditions to support visitation, two studies point to the importance of the quality of biodiversity in urban parks as a decisive factor in the experience of contact with nature and the perception of benefits. When comparing urban and non-urban parks, the observations showed that there is still preservation and a wealth of biodiversity in its most "natural" state, where it is possible to enjoy a particularly meaningful experience with nature that is proportional to improvements in the mental and psychological state (happiness, relaxation, peace, serenity).

However, given the distance of these areas from urban centers and the difficulties inherent in periodic visitation, the presence of urban parks with a wealth of biodiversity takes on even greater importance for city dwellers, which suggests investments in this direction, obtaining positive results in urban and natural green spaces.

And in this vein, it was possible to recognize that studies seeking to investigate the relationship between natural (non-urban) parks and health and well-being are still incipient. In these cases, the research seeks to understand the motivations and perceived benefits of visiting the parks, through structured and semi-structured interviews.

It is important to mention that, despite the recognized potential of natural parks to boost local economies and improve the quality of life of the populations living in their direct surroundings, few studies look at the relationship that these populations establish with protected areas, including the benefits associated with health and well-being, which corroborates the statement that studies that prioritize the perception of local communities about the benefits of living in the vicinity of natural parks are still rare.

These benefits include, for example, fresh air, water quality, a milder climate, tranquillity, a greater sense of connection with the natural environment and excellent places for physical exercise in the midst of nature. In general, it was possible to recognize that studies on natural parks follow the same research bias adopted in research on urban parks, focusing on the dimensions of physical, psychological/emotional and social well-being. This finding goes against the assertion [11].

Natural protected areas such as national and state parks, which are generally richer in biodiversity and located outside cities, provide more types of benefits to visitors.

The contribution to social well-being was also pointed out by most of the studies carried out in non-urban parks. Visiting parks contributed to physical and cognitive development, the ability to get along in groups, and combating disorders such as hyperactivity, attention deficit and respiratory problems.

They focus on aspects related to physical health, disease prevention, restoration through contact with nature and moments of sociability. Other aspects related to the health and well-being of visitors, such as environmental, ecological, cultural, economic and intellectual well-being, are still on the periphery of debates. The spaces on the edge of the beaches, i.e. those close to the water, are the most frequented, being used for walks, photos and hikes. It is worth remembering that the Icaraí neighborhood is the busiest and has a complete infrastructure, making it a busy place throughout the day and night. A wide range of activities can be seen, from cycling, walking, running and even water sports.

Public spaces such as parks, streets and squares are places where citizens spontaneously engage in physical activity daily. The processes of benefiting existing infrastructure should focus on building a collective imaginary that is linked to the daily lives of residents and users. Through activities such as walking, resting, contemplating, talking, running and observing.

From this holistic observation, it was possible to see that the city of Niterói has spaces that are ideal for practicing sports, especially in the areas near the beaches, where the population gathers for walks and other recreational and sporting activities. The spaces are also frequently used by the local school community, becoming an extension of the classroom.

In this sense, efforts to investigate the real effects of visiting parks, in terms of the relevance of these areas, existing gaps and the demands of tourists and people living near these areas, are necessary and strategic. This can justify political and financial support for natural and urban parks and help public agencies, managers and communities to design integrated public use programs, structure projects aimed at health, well-being, leisure and tourism, as well as communication and relationships with tourists and potential visitors, with a view to ensuring that the full potential of these protected areas is used by society in the broadest sense.

Over the last decade, there has been a global increase in non-communicable diseases, such as heart disease, some types of cancer and type 2 diabetes. This is likely to worsen as the global population rises from 54% of people currently living in cities to a predicted 70% by 2050. Almost all this urban growth will take place in less developed countries [12].

Faced with this scenario, to minimize the problems, some programs and studies have been implemented with the aim of highlighting the connection and potential of parks and green areas for improving the health and well-being of the populations of urban centers and also those living in the direct surroundings of these areas, most of them developed in urban and peri-urban parks.

All of them point to the benefits of green areas for human health, which is supported and cited by subsequent writers who draw attention to experiences developed in countries such as Australia [11]. It is also important to mention that experiences of visiting protected areas such as parks, especially those linked to ecotourism, have the potential to provide visitors with moments of leisure in the midst of nature, improved health and well-being, experiences and learning about natural and cultural heritage, thus contributing to their effective appropriation and appreciation, as well as boosting local economies and increasing financial resources for the maintenance of these areas [13].

The challenge, however, is to develop responsible tourism that is integrated with socio-cultural diversity, traditional knowledge and biodiversity conservation, with the participation of and dialogue between different actors, such as public managers, local communities, the tourism sector, researchers and specialists in areas such as ecology, anthropology and public health. Only in this way will it be possible to build a tourism model that effectively promotes people's well-being, social justice and environmental sustainability when we consider the relationship between parks, tourism and health and well-being at the same time [14].

One of the challenges lies precisely in gaining a better understanding of the existing debates in the specialized literature on park visitation and its relationship with health and well-being, in order to reveal priority research approaches, as well as gaps and advances in studies and ways of effectively harnessing the potential of parks to promote health, well-being, leisure and tourism for societies.

The aim was to understand the approaches of studies on this subject in terms of the typology of urban and non-urban parks investigated, and the benefits most associated with human health and well-being.

IV. CONCLUSION

Understanding the benefits of parks for the health and well-being of the population has become increasingly important in academic circles in recent years. However, this issue is not yet high on the agendas of environmental, tourism and public health organizations, especially in Brazil. This indicates that the potential of green areas to improve people's quality of life has not yet been fully exploited

It is therefore necessary to establish partnerships between protected area professionals and public health authorities to more systematically address the health potential of protected areas and to ensure that informed

decisions are made in all areas of the health system, including treatment, prevention, public use programs and territorial development and tourism policies in the context of urban parks and natural parks.

It is necessary to obtain political and financial support for natural and urban parks, as well as to help interlocutors from public bodies, managers and communities to design integrated public use programs, structure projects aimed at health, well-being, leisure and tourism, and also communication and relationships with tourists and potential visitors, with a view to ensuring that the full potential of these protected areas is used for society, in a broad sense of the determining factors for carrying out physical activities in parks, squares and physical activity areas, promoting quality of life, the environment and health promotion.

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