



Highlighting Rural Researchers

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WHAT'S MORE

- *Iain is planning to defend his Master's thesis this fall*
- *Iain contributes regularly to the [Imagining Rural Futures](#) blog page ran through RDI*
- *This June, Iain will be sharing his insights on well-being at the [2023 CRRF conference](#) in Lethbridge, AB*

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BRANDON
UNIVERSITY

Iain Cowie

Master in Rural Development Graduate Student

GETTING TO KNOW IAIN COWIE

Iain Cowie began his education at Brandon University in 2015, focusing his undergraduate studies in sociology. After discovering the [Master in Rural Development Graduate Program](#) offered at Brandon University, he became inspired to pair his knowledge and experiences in the social sciences to rural and remote community work. Having been born and raised in Brandon, Manitoba, the idea of applying his experiences and knowledge to community development felt like a perfect fit. He is currently working towards the completion of his Masters degree and is expected to defend his thesis this 2023 fall semester.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The pandemic started during the first year of his graduate degree and he had to adapt to working and studying remotely. As well, like many other research projects at the time, the social distancing restrictions reshaped the way in which his research was going to be conducted.

Early on in the program, Iain came across an article discussing the Norwegian concept of [friluftsliv](#). Friluftsliv roughly translates to “[open-air living](#),” and emphasizes the importance of embracing the outdoors and incorporating experiences in nature into your everyday life.

This concept became a significant point of interest for him, both personally and academically. He soon after began a deep dive into literature related to the concept of well-being and its connection to green spaces and outdoor recreation. His research was twofold: first he wanted to conceptualize and define what well-being was, and then he wanted to identify how outdoor experiences and recreational activities impacted this definition of well-being.



I think the pandemic helped people realize that these green spaces really are important.

- Iain Cowie

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In order to assess these impacts of outdoor recreation, Iain first assessed literature which explored the impact of past epidemics on people's mental health and well-being. In addition to these studies, Iain administered a subjective survey to around 80 people within the Westman region to determine how individuals perceived their experiences with outdoor recreational activities during lock-downs and social distancing.

Through the COVID-19 pandemic, it became apparent to a lot of people living in Canada how important it is to incorporate outdoor experiences into their days. This is because outdoor recreation not only fosters positive mental health, but the physical activity associated to outdoor recreation can equally enhance physical health. Parks and green spaces provide critical infrastructure that facilitates these opportunities.

The survey that was administered showed that over 90% of respondents from the Westman region wanted to see more investments into parks and green spaces because of the positive experiences they provide members of the community. These valuable insights are important when engaging with city planning and policy recommendations for the future.

CURRENT PROJECTS

While Iain is a researcher at the Rural Development Institute, he also works for Myera Group and Function Four Ltd. in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In addition to exploring the concept of well-being further, Iain hopes to conduct more research in relation to community-based assessments. One major project he is currently working on involves evolving the E-Index, a community digital assessment tool, to include more insights relating to infrastructure, sovereign wealth creation, food, nutrition, health, and so much more.

The hope is that the insights and findings provided through these community engagements will inform policy-makers on how to move forward with community development in the future.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Iain's research regarding the deep connection between well-being and outdoor recreation demonstrated how the Westman region values green spaces. Unique insights such as these are an important component of community-based planning that prioritizes the needs and desires of the communities themselves.

The Rural Development Institute is grateful to be affiliated with a variety of communities, agencies, academics and students across Canada and beyond. These relationships have facilitated the development of unique networks allowing for collaborative projects to take form, and RDI wants to extend its appreciation to all rural researchers.