

## **Natural parks are a source of health and well-being for their visitors.**

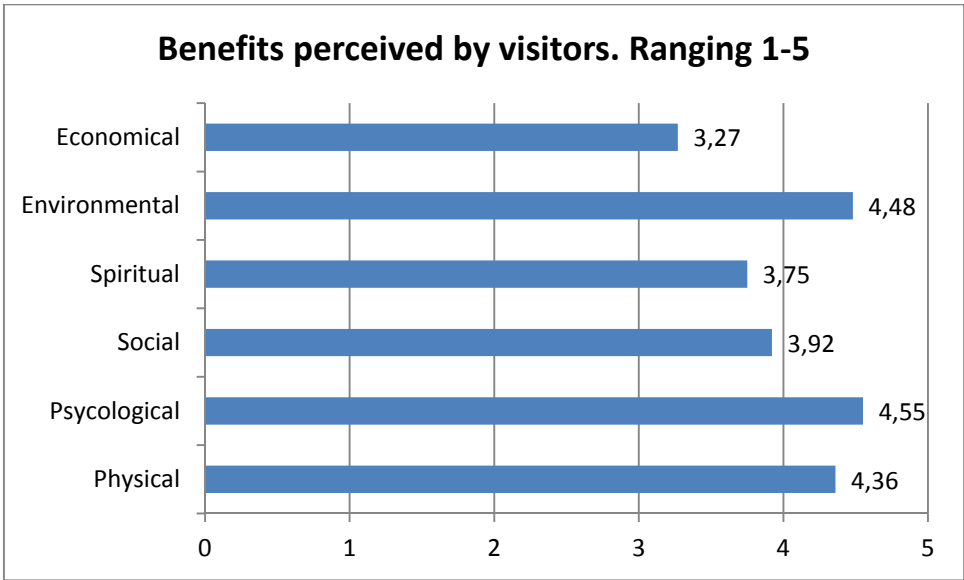
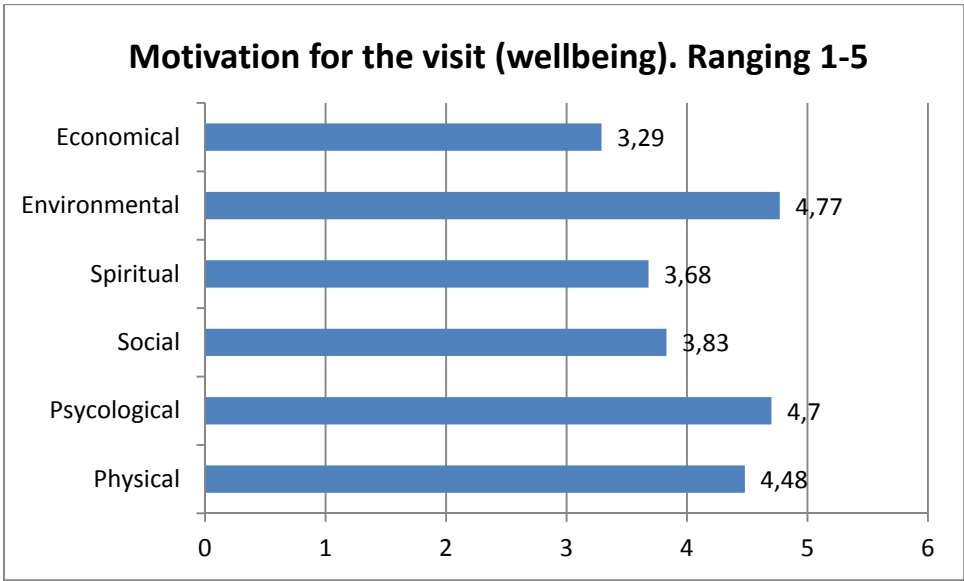
### **Provincial Council of Barcelona**

(Study carried out in 2015/2016)

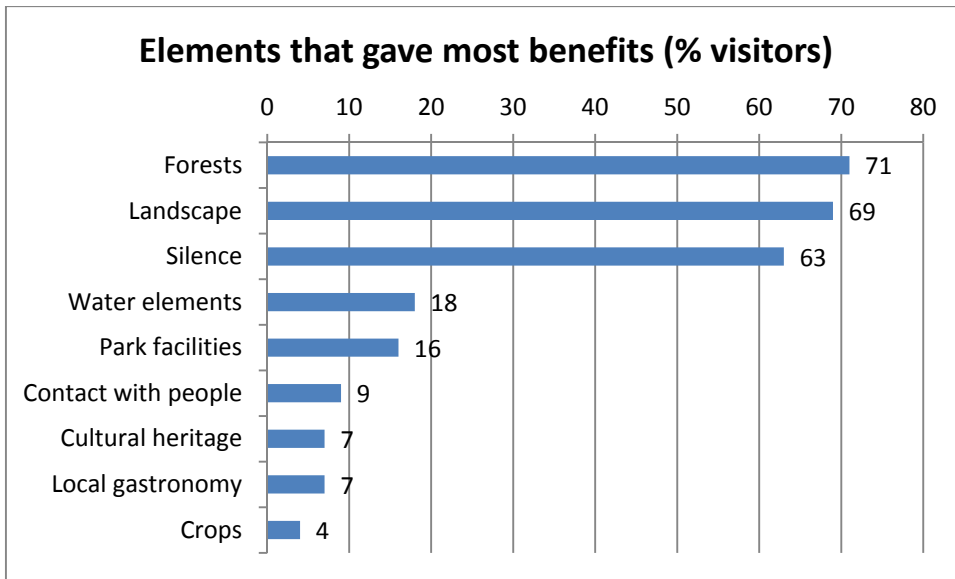
A study developed by the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and the Provincial Council of Barcelona has identified for the first time in our country the importance of visiting the natural parks for the health and well-being of the people. The study had as main objective to analyse the perception of visitors the Natural Parks Network of the Province de Barcelona on the role they play in relation to health and human well-being. More than 500 surveys have been made to visitors to the natural parks of Montseny, Serra de Collserola and Sant Llorenç del Munt and l'Obac, and the Parc del Garraf. These parks receive yearly more than 6 million visitors.

The results of the study highlight the importance of the Natural Parks Network as spaces where citizens can enjoy a healthy lifestyle and as health and wellness areas for to society. Indeed, this perception study shows that, apart from favouring the conservation of biodiversity and the natural and cultural heritage, protected natural areas also contribute to improving various aspects of health and human well-being. In fact, almost **seven out of every ten of the visitors surveyed (68.4%) recognized a perceived improvement in their health and well-being as a result of their visit to the natural park, while three quarters (75.8%) have indicated that the motivation to visit the park has been related in a relatively important way with some of the dimensions of health and well-being.**

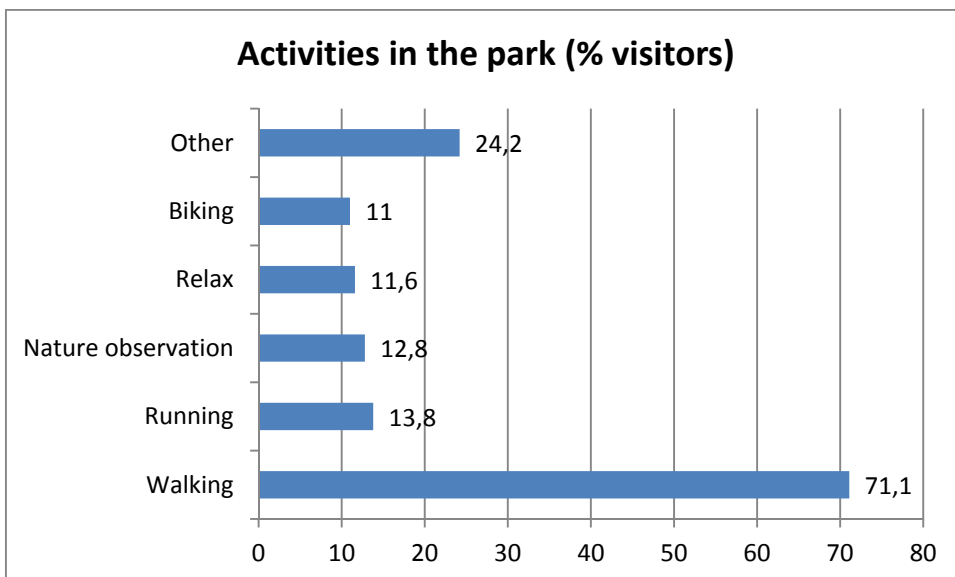
In this sense, different levels of assessment are made evident depending on the different dimensions of health and well-being studied in the study. **The dimensions most valued by visitors are the environmental well-being (for the possibility of being in touch and integrating into nature), the psychological well-being (for the possibility of relaxing and recovering from stress as well as learn things) and physical well-being (for the possibility of physical exercise).** In addition to the distance, although with relatively high values, visitors identify the spiritual well-being (for the possibility of finding inspiration or having a deep connection to nature), social welfare (for the possibility of family or friends) and financial well-being (for the possibility of participating in a relatively inexpensive leisure activity).



The visitors surveyed have demonstrated a very high importance of at least three elements of the visited parks that have contributed to improving their perceptions of well-being. These are **forests (71%), the landscape in general offered by the parks (69%), and the silence they also offer (63%)**. In addition to distance (below 20%), other elements that have been valued positively are: water (in the case of parks that have more water elements or associated with water), the parks' own facilities (paths, information centres, etc.), contact with people, cultural heritage, gastronomy, among other things.



In addition, the study has allowed for an analysis of the sociodemographic profile and behaviour of the visitors of the natural parks managed by the Provincial Council of Barcelona. Among other aspects, it has been found that visitors who reside closest to the parks are the most frequent visitors and, at the same time, those who best value these spaces as healthy green infrastructures. In relation to the activities carried out by the visitors, it is necessary to say that the data that the study contributes are very important, since all the activities have some relation with the health and the well-being of the people who practice them and more if it is considered that they are practiced in a natural environment. Specifically, **the activity of walking, carried out by seven of every ten visitors (71.1%), is considered one of the healthiest activities that exist and affects especially the physical welfare.** Running activities (13.8%) and cycling (11%) are also activities with a strong physical well-being component, more marked even if walking because of having a higher level of intensity or effort. Activities to observe nature (12.8%) and relax (11%), however, are much more associated with the psychological and spiritual dimension of welfare. All activities, however, if practiced in a group have a certain component of social welfare.



The study, finally, establishes a series of initial proposals to promote the healthy use of the Natural Parks Network, among which is the impulse of new policies integrated in the field of conservation of natural spaces and of public health, as well as of the dissemination and communication of the values associated to the health and the well-being that provide the natural parks, and the deepening in the scientific research in this field.