

Photos courtesy of Recreation Northwest

Time in nature is beneficial to our emotional and physical health—but if you don't believe us, just ask the folks at Recreation Northwest. This Bellingham nonprofit has a straightforward mission: to “teach the health benefits of nature, promote outdoor recreation, and steward the places where we play.” Founder Todd Elsworth is a fierce advocate for nature as a source of human wellbeing, and he and his team have been working to educate the community in Whatcom County since 2013.

Right now Recreation Northwest is working to transform their stewardship site, a native plant garden in Fairhaven Park, into a full-fledged outdoor education classroom. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Recreation Northwest also partnered with Western Washington University faculty and student interns to build groundwork for a peer-to-peer program, leading people outdoors into local parks as “Nature Navigators.”

These projects are part of the current evolution of the Parkscriptions program, established in 2016 and modeled after the National Park Service's Parks RX program. The original idea was to develop educational tools and collect extensive data on local parks via the Whatcom Parks Finder platform; this way, participating medical providers could “parkscribe” time in nature close to patients' homes. The program gained traction, but Elsworth said retention proved to be tough.

“Among our barriers was the fact that we were trying to revolutionize the healthcare and insurance industries' procedures and practices,” Elsworth says. “In prescribing nature, we were David in direct competition with the Goliath of drug companies.”



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Todd Elsworth, Founder,  
Recreation Northwest



Thus, in 2019, Recreation Northwest pivoted and began developing direct programming for outdoor programs in Whatcom County. Most recently, they've partnered with the Bellingham School District to bring the Parkscriptions programs to Options High School. Through nature-based education, students will foster emotional and behavioral health, learn positive coping skills, and discover what it means to be an environmental steward.

Recreation Northwest's work has already made an impact in Whatcom County, but moving forward, Elsworth hopes that the organization's programming will help the wider healthcare and insurance industry to recognize the “tremendous potential of healing in nature.”

“We are privileged to live in a community and region where we have public access to beautiful parks and open spaces,” Elsworth says. “I hope that people will equate more value to our public lands and work to ensure protection, and guaranteed access is also critical to providing this opportunity for the mental health of our populations.”

