Quality of Life
Doctors have used the phrase “quality of life” for many years when discussing their patients’ health. The concept has become so pervasive to modern thought that there is even a nonprofit called the Quality of Life Project devoted to exploring its components and guiding people to finding more of it. In 2005, the Asian country Bhutan received a good bit of publicity for its reliance on a Gross National Happiness Index rather than Gross National Product to define its population’s place in the world.

There is a growing recognition, given not a little impetus by Richard Louv’s 2005 book, Last Child in the Woods, that connecting people with nature has a profound effect on their perception of whether their life, in its simplest terms, is “good” or “bad.” The book garnered well-deserved attention for forcing us to consider what difference the outdoors has made on our lives and whether the loss of a meaningful connection to nature would make future generations less satisfied with their lives.

What Part Do Pennsylvania’s Parks Play in Defining Our Quality of Life?
Completion of the commonwealth’s Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) said much about Pennsylvanians’ perception and appreciation for outdoor spaces. State parks were a specific focus of a portion of the SCORP research and the findings are revealing. Nearly half of park visitors admitted that their level of physical activity is higher during their visit than in their daily lives, and that physical activity made people more likely to visit another park. Interestingly, that activity (whether a hike, a bike ride, swimming or fishing) caused our “typical park visitor” to rate the park itself either “good” or “excellent,” with park facilities providing a clean, welcoming, friendly, economical environment for a day outside. In short, if perception is reality, those lovely little endorphins kicked in, making for a generally happier person!

“Quality of Life: at a personal level, the degree of enjoyment and satisfaction experienced in everyday life, embracing health, personal relationships, the environment, quality of working life, social life, and leisure time.”
Much of SCORP speaks to quality of life. Let’s face it, every day we get a little older and maintaining a certain level of good health increases our happiness quotient. State park visitors were more likely than the average citizen to cite physical health as a primary reason for being outside, and overwhelmingly supported future development of active amenities (trails, canoe launches, playgrounds) in the parks.

And what of our communities, the towns and cities that surround the public lands?
Researchers are slowly beginning to gather evidence of what it means to have a park next door. The Great Allegheny Passage, a 125-mile bike trail that links Point State Park in downtown Pittsburgh through many small towns past Ohiopyle State Park and the surrounding mountains to Cumberland, Maryland, has been shown to increase revenue by 25% in the businesses in the towns along the trail. It’s no surprise then that 75% of the business owners who started a business in the two years prior to the study’s publication cited the trail as a primary reason for their choosing the location they did.

At the other side of the state, the City of Philadelphia looked at the impact of its park system on property values and discovered that real estate located within a mere 500 feet of a park measuring at least one acre in area was worth 5% more than the average property. For the city, this means millions of dollars in increased value. For even the smallest community, however, a 5% increase in value translates to thousands of dollars added to the tax base resulting in better schools, more libraries, and enhanced community services like police and fire protection. With 117 state parks in 60 of Pennsylvania’s 67 counties, the potential impact is monumental.

Pennsylvania’s State Forests Have Their Own Role in Providing the Best Quality of Life
Drinking water, habitat and air quality are all improved by the existence of forest. Forested lands provide filtration of runoff and erosion prevention. In the United States, some 60 million people receive their drinking water from watersheds containing national forests and Pennsylvania’s state forests contain 215,000 acres of municipal watershed. Drink it, farm with it, swim in it—every forest acre is vital to preserving the clean water that makes life possible.

Forests provide their own opportunity to get away from it all and forge valuable connections to the natural world. The many recreation benefits of forests include hunting, fishing, mountain biking and hiking. Pennsylvania state forests contain 3000 miles of trails for all to enjoy.

“If, as shown by SCORP, 46% of Pennsylvanians find relaxation, peace of mind, the opportunity to be in nature or simple fun to be the chief benefits of outdoor recreation, then, the vastness of our two million state forest acres offer an unequaled opportunity to experience wilderness.

Sometimes, the Best Things in Life Really Are Free
How each of us defines quality of life is as individual as we are. Yet in what surely is a time of greater financial stress on many of us, how valuable is it to have 2.5 million acres of protected public lands free for the visiting? Nearly unique among our neighboring states, Pennsylvania parks and forests are truly open to the public, with no entrance, access, parking, or user fees. Look for opportunities to try geocaching or disc golf, right along with a good healthy dose of hiking and fishing.

As one of the Quality of Life Project bloggers notes, “Being outside allows relationships, creativity and activity to unfold... The first step is consciously choosing to spend time with your kids away from the distractions that exist for each of us inside the house and look right beyond our doorstep.”

May Pennsylvania parks and forests offer you that perfect spot right beyond the doorstep, to recharge and renew, reconnect and relate.

“Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons, It is to grow in the open air, and to eat and sleep with the earth.”
—Walt Whitman, Song of the Open Road