

RECREATION SAFETY IN MUNICIPAL PARKS - BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA AND TSUKUBA, JAPAN: A COMPARISON STUDY OF RISK MANAGEMENT

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Abstract: Cultural differences affects the design and use of playground equipment in parks. Comparative research exploring the differences in playground facilities, parental supervision, and use was conducted on-site in Tsukuba City, Ibaraki Prefecture, Japan and Bloomington, Indiana, USA. The study examines park design, play equipment, sports fields, use patterns, and parental supervision of children. The study evaluates the relative user risk to injury in both cultural setting.

A primary concern of park administrator in the United States is the prevalence of law suits resulting from accidents. In the United States, risk managers and playground safety specialists play key roles in park and recreation department policy making and facility design. The job of risk managers is to identify hazards and reduce the risks which are predicted to be the source of injuries and loss. In the past few decades recreation administrators have learned that users of their facilities and participants in their programs will demand compensation if they are injured. Public agencies are particularly susceptible to litigation.

Recreation related litigation and law suits are nearly non-existent in Japan's society. This fact exists with the knowledge that design of facilities and playgrounds in Japan are somewhat dangerous when compared to United States Standards. Japanese park administrators and designers appear not to be overly concerned with possible injury claims and law suits involving hazardous park conditions.

Introduction

A primary concern of U.S. municipal park administrators is law suits resulting from negligence claims. In the United States, risk managers and playground safety specialists are a vital part of many recreation departments. In the last few decades, administrators have learned that park users demand compensation if they are injured. Municipal governments are particularly susceptible to law suits because they fit the category of being financially able to pay the damages.

This study compares the different approaches to risk management between two parallel cities, Tsukuba, Japan and Bloomington, Indiana in regards to park and playground safety and risk management. It also studies the cultural differences of child supervision in the park setting.

General Background:

Tsukuba City is located approximately 60 km (37.3 miles)

northeast of Tokyo Japan in the Ibaraki Prefecture. Tsukuba City is divided into two districts: (1) The Research and Education District where research and educational institutes, commercial facilities and some limited housing are located, and (2) the surrounding suburban area. The area encompassing Tsukuba City and the suburban districts consist of approximately 28,560 hectares (110 square miles). The city's present population (1995) of 65,200 and has a projected population of 100,000 in 2020. Parks make up 100 hectares (247.7 U.S. acres) or 3.7% of the total lands with an additional 19 hectares (47 U.S. Acres) or .05% in waterways.

Tsukuba City has a total of 99 parks and green areas. There are two (2) multipurpose parks, twenty (20) neighborhood parks, forty-nine (49) child parks, and 23 green areas. The most extensive park units are the multipurpose parks of Doho (20 hectares) or 49.5 U.S. acres) and Akatsuka (8.5 hectares or 21 U.S. acres). Doho park especially is worthy of note, with a world-class solar heated indoor swimming pool and a heat efficient gymnasium. All parks are connected to each other through the pedestrian and bicycle ways. Directly north of the Tsukuba suburban area is the extensive Suigo Tsukuba Quasi National Park. On the eastern side of the Ibaraki Prefecture is the second largest freshwater lake in Japan, Lake Kasumigaura.¹

Bloomington, Indiana is located in Monroe County, approximately 50 miles south of Indianapolis, Indiana. The city's boundary encompasses approximately 25 square miles. The city has a population of 65,000 with an additional 36,000 students enrolled at Indiana University. The Bloomington Parks and Recreation Department has 32 units and is responsible for managing more than 1750 acres of lakes, 1400 acres of natural forested acres and preserves, 600 acres of intensive use park and recreation sites, and nine buildings encompassing a total of 3750 acres.² The 192,000 acre Hoosier National Forest lies directly south of the city. The largest inland lake in Indiana, Lake Monroe, is located five miles south of the city.

Bloomington has a rich variety of recreation facilities, including Banneker Community Center, Bryan Park, Cascades Golf Course, Frank Southern Ice Arena, Griffy Lake Nature Center, Older American Center, and Twin Lakes Sports Park.

It should be noted that there are many parallel factors in comparing Bloomington Indiana to Tsukuba Japan. They both have similar populations with a considerable number of non-nationals and university students. Both have major universities and research facilities. Both cities have large areas of adjacent federal lands and a large fresh water lake nearby (Hoosier National Forest and Lake Monroe near Bloomington and Suigo Tsukuba Quasi National Park and Lake Kasumigaura near Tsukuba City).

Conclusions

There has been no litigation or claim resulting from accidents or property loss in the Tsukuba municipal parks during the last 20 years³ During the same period there has been 50

negligence claims resulting of alleged negligence in city parks resulting in six court cases.⁴ The lack of recreation related litigation in Japan may result from a combination of cultural and historical precedent, lack of understanding of Japanese laws regarding negligence, and lack of access to legal counsel, and the general attitude of the court system that lawsuits resulting from recreation activities are frivolous.⁵

Constant parental participation and supervision of children at play appears to be the rule in Tsukuba parks while direct supervision of children less than six years of age in Bloomington was normal, many children between the ages of 6-12 appeared unsupervised. Mothers and fathers take an

equal role during the evening and weekend park visits supervising the children and looking after their safety. Little differences between parental gender roles could be observed between Bloomington and Tsukuba. It was observed that the children appeared to respond more readily to parental warnings and direction in Tsukuba than in Bloomington.

Park play equipment and facilities in Tsukuba were dangerous as compared to U.S. standards. Little effort was made to soften fall areas around playgrounds in Tsukuba. Some play equipment was inherently dangerous with unstable footing, difficulty in climbing, and excessive height above ground.

Observations Regarding Parental Supervision

Age Groups	0-3	4-6	7-9	10-12	13-15	16-18	Total
U.S. Supervised	142 100%	164 92%	56 40%	8 4%	0 0%	3 2%	373 38%
U.S. Not Supervised	0 0%	15 8%	83 60%	178 96%	167 100%	154 98%	597 62%
Japan Supervised	178 100%	155 100%	138 99%	146 92%	124 83%	45 34%	786 86%
Japan Not Supervised	0 0%	0 0%	2 1%	13 8%	25 17%	89 66%	129 14%

Research conducted in Bloomington Indiana, USA and Tsukuba, Ibaraki, Prefecture, Japan

Research conducted during the month of July in 1997 and 1998

Ages determined partly by visual estimation, and partly by interview with parent(s).

1. Publication of the Ibaraki Prefecture entitled *Tsukuba Science City* dated April 1995.
2. 1992-1996 Parks and Recreation Master Plan, City of Bloomington, dated August 15, 1992 and updated to status as of August 1996.
3. Toshiichi Tada, Information Coordinator, Ibaraki Prefectural Government, Tsukuba Office, 1-10-1 Azuma, Tsukuba Ibaraki 303 Japan, Interview.
4. Records of the Monroe County Clerk of the Circuit Court, Bloomington Indiana 1976-1996.
5. Toshiichi Tada Interview, *supra* note 2