

MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE ON THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF PARKS AND RECREATIONAL OPEN SPACE IN AUSTRALIA

By Dr David Aldous
c.Late 1994

Since European settlement, parkland and other suburban green spaces have provided the outdoor environment for many special interests, hobbies and other recreational pursuits. In situ park and recreation pursuits range from informal activities such as walking, cycling, socialising, picnicking, bushwalking and angling, to the more formal activities, such as grassed sports (football, soccer, polocrosse, baseball and cricket), aquatic centre, recreational lake and river sports (boating, rowing, water skiing, canoeing, rafting, sailing, surfing) to aerial bungy-jumping and para-sailing.

Many surveys have been undertaken by major park and government agencies, city councils, botanic gardens and educational institutions, in an effort to survey, analyse and interpret community recreational behaviour patterns, awareness and motivation levels, as well as to interpret the community's mindset in relation to green open space. The principal motives for people's visiting parkland have been generally ranked as socialisation, sightseeing, fitness/sport, escape and relaxation, entertainment and education. These activities may vary depending on the focus and mission statement of the managing organisation. For example, Melbourne's Royal Botanic Gardens activities have been grouped as recreational (52%), botanical (23.3%) and educational (24.7%). Studies of Maroondah and Brimbank parks in Victoria, under the management control of Melbourne Parks and Waterways, reveal that approximately 20% of the visitors go there specifically to relax, while around 50% go there to walk, which presumably also involves an element of relaxation.

This interpretation supports recent views that the function of parks and open space is to help people to relax in different ways. In fact many of the activities reported in these studies involve a component of relaxation, such as sightseeing, sitting around and socialising. In all, parks and green space are viewed as an environment for pleasant, relaxing, enjoyable experiences, as well as an escape from the confines of the home, business or institution.

More generally, Australians are more involved with ex-situ park and recreation pursuits that include home-based activities and the community arts. Recent studies now emphasise watching television, reading, visiting friends and relatives, listening to music, relaxing, gardening, dining out, walking, entertaining at home, keeping fit, outdoor play, arts and crafts and visiting clubs and hotels as significant recreational activities. Several of these special interests are home-based. However the majority of them are relatively passive in nature, and indicate a need and appreciation for open green space.

Park and recreation demand in Australia, is influenced amongst other things, by population, economic conditions, car ownership, education and training, time availability, government policies, fashions, knowledge and skills. Population growth and spread will therefore influence the total recreation activity spectrum. The highest concentration of citizens occurs principally within the vast sprawling coastal metropolises and provincial centres across Australia. In New South Wales 84 per cent of the state's population live in the 'inner' 20% of the State's territory around Sydney. The comparable figure for Victoria is 81% for the central 20% territorial core. In the case of Melbourne, the projected population is between 3.46 and 3.45 in 2010 and between 3.5 and 4.2 million in 2020.

Similarly Australia is experiencing rapid population ageing and proportionally fewer children. These two groups at opposite extremes of physical ability, experience and maturity, exhibit widely divergent recreational interests. Over 90% of our elderly live in the community, with home ownership rates approaching 80 per cent. Increasing numbers of older people will be living in suburbs built for private vehicles. This will increase the already severe difficulties with transport in visiting parks and park services. It is expected that population ageing will increase government outlays on the aged by 131% cent between 1981 and 2001, assuming a continuation of current funding arrangements. These changes, in association with the differences in population age structure, increased mobility and increased leisure dollar will challenge managers of parks and recreation into the twenty-first century.

Australians are now seeing significant increases in the provision of recreation services from their local government municipalities and other public agencies. Many are now seeing the connection between environmentalism and the increased value and importance being placed by the community on local park systems and quality of life issues. Running parallel with this development has been a marked increase in the number of community self-help groups, many of which offer broadly-based cultural, recreational and educational services and support at the local level. The formation of these community groups reflects the increased value being placed on the quality of the physical and social environment in which people live and often articulate the community's expressed needs. With most park and recreation utilities and services in Australia being vested in government or statutory authorities, these local communities and groups are now actively sought and encouraged to take an interest in their local parks, reserves and open space.

Programs and activities developed by local and state governments have raised community awareness about the importance of environmental awareness and protection, the role that individuals can play, as well as create opportunities for the community, government and industry to work together towards common goals. In 1994 Victoria developed a program called Victoria: Clean & Green which has brought together the community, industry and government to improve the State's environment through personal action. Such a series of programs encompasses all the major environmental issues - everything from recycling, energy use and litter reduction to water consumption and parks and coastal management. New South Wales has also conducted a successful National Water Week which had contributions from many government departments such as Conservation and Natural Resources, Agriculture, Water Resources, Public Works and the Environmental Protection Agency, and has made the community more aware of Australia's need to conserve water.

Many Australian are becoming actively interested in the maintenance of the state's national, regional, urban and city parks. The Victorian Department of Conservation & Natural Resources recently introduced Volunteers in Conservation, program to get people involved in Victoria's national parks. Another civic organisation, the Victorian National Parks Association, sponsors and operates Friends of Parks. Activities include surveys, research, seed collecting, propagation, tree planting, monitoring, nature walks and environmental weeding. Melbourne Parks and Waterways (formerly within the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works) also operates a Volunteers in Parks program for people over 18 with projects that suit their interest and skills. Volunteers become part of the park management team, working with rangers to provide visitor services. Victoria's Conservation and Natural Resources "Botanic Guardian" provides financial support for community groups to protect threatened flora on public land.

Government activities also serve a useful purpose in developing an awareness of, and respect for, the environment. Other 'clean and green' initiatives include major studies into community attitudes on waste and litter issues upon which education programs will be based, distributing booklets with practical environmental tips for householders, introducing good neighbour programs to manage pest plants and animals on public property, a parks network map and brochure, clean air and clean water campaigns, community activities to raise public understanding of urban drainage, and the publishing of informal booklets for schools called School Greenhouse Saver. Greening Australia, a federal government initiative, which covers all states and territories, enables many school children to take part in a program which not only informs them of the value of trees, but assists each child to plant a tree, often in association with local government park and recreation officers. These school groups, along with scouts, guides, Venturer Scouts and others, have maintained a close and useful relationship with parks, bushland and agricultural areas through seed collecting, tree-planting and conservation activities.

Fostering the need and love of parkland begins at the primary school level. Many successful interpretative programs are carried out by public authorities. For example, the Royal Melbourne Zoological Board, a prime mover in conservation issues, provides regular instruction and tuition to school children on the activities of its three properties at Parkville, Healesville Sanctuary and the Werribee Zoo.

In the past decade there has been increased community participation at the local level. Community involvement has been tackled in a variety of ways. Many councils have also initiated friend's groups and schemes to plant trees to retain community interest and strengthens peoples' ability to contribute to the

greening of the park. Other approaches have included the use of park wardens and committees of management, programs for industry experience in parks, stewardship contracts to citizens or interest groups, providing for demonstration arboreta to create areas of special interest for visitors and students, formation of park trusts, or management committees by citizens, professionals and industry as well as the dedication of urban land to parkland. The Bicentennial Park system in Sydney, New South Wales, is 104 acres of recreational parkland, wetlands and mangrove forest complete with ample picnic, cycle and pedestrian paths, a tea house and field studies centre; all developed in consultation with the local community.

Many organisations, amongst them the Royal Australian Institute of Parks and Recreation, Sydney's Centennial Park & Moore Park Trust, New South Wales's National Parks and Wildlife Services, the Victorian Parks Association, and many City Councils, have developed a set of values which have engendered an appreciation of, and respect for, plants and open space as the basis of our prosperity and quality of life. This new ethic means a shift from placing purely utilitarian values on parkland to accepting the intrinsic value of parkland as the natural basis for human existence.

Conflicts have arisen between recreationists and special interest groups, often when different activities or services share a common environment setting, or as a result of overcrowding of participants in the same activity. For example in the high plains of Victoria, conflicts have arisen between bushwalkers, cattle owners who lease the land, and motor-vehicle drivers all wishing to use the same tracks at the same time. Similarly many resort areas in Queensland have similar conflicts between swimmers, sailboat riders, surfers and fishing boat trawlers, for use of the marine environment.

Among these have been conservation groups whose fight may be to preserve natural areas of special amenity, or conservation value, including alpine areas, bushlands, roadside vegetation and coastal zones. In northern Victoria there are conflicts over the alpine region and near Melbourne City the Macedon and Dandenong Ranges have had particularly heavy attention. Other community-based groups have battled against the location of freeways and industrial activities on land set aside for parks and recreation open-space. These sorts of concerns reflect an increasing interest and willingness by more and more people to understand and influence the local community in which they live and a belief that people can affect their own physical and social environment.

The gradual increase in the recreation provision for many groups such as women, young children, the elderly, ethnic minorities, and the disabled, reflects, in part, the improved lobbying power of these community groups. Documentation and demonstration of these various population groups being disadvantaged in terms of recreation provision has inevitably led to government being pressured into providing fairer treatment for all of these groups.

Australian planners have developed one solution in developing the concept of the "recreation opportunity spectrum" as a useful tool in assisting to identify opportunities for park and recreation activities. The concept allows the highly diverse range of recreational activities to be matched with a range of setting requirements based on physical, biological, social and managerial conditions of a specific place. For example the Victorian Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has adopted five classes; remote, semi-remote, roaded-natural, semi-developed, and developed; to describe the spectrum of recreation opportunities for land and water recreational opportunities under their responsibility.

Overcrowding is a major issue with The Royal National Park, south of Sydney, which was recently described as "being loved to death by more than two million visitors a year, threatening its survival into the next century". As far as we can tell, attendances at all national parks in Australia have been growing at a rate at least equal to the rate of population growth since the Second World war and often much faster. Conflicts are often resolved by making provision for a management plan, which is available for public comment. For example among the proposals contained within the management plan for the Royal National Park include introduction of a camping fee, a ban on horseriding, keeping some of the cabins and huts in the park for their social, architectural and historical significance and effective feral animal and weed control. National park authorities have also led the way in controlling the levels and patterns of recreation use according to the capability of the land to sustain such use without irreversible damage or conflict with the primary purposes of the area, while avoiding unnecessary restrictions on usage.

Conflicts in the different recreation and leisure opportunities can have a direct influence on the local physical environment, and may significantly reduce ecological, social, economic, and landscape values. Losses of environmental value are often greatest in developed recreation areas, often as a result in the installation of facilities such as parking, sports grounds, and coastal marinas. Riparian and remnant areas of amenity grasslands and bushland are often sensitive to the disturbances created by construction of recreation sources such as camping areas as this activity is associated with other recreation, such as walking, fishing, canoeing, boating and hunting. Alpine environments and landscape values can also suffer through the development of alpine resorts and other facilities. Power boats and canoeing can disturb bird habitats, such as roosting and nesting sites. Recreation activities that involve the harvesting or extraction of natural resources, such as salt and fresh water fishing, shell collection, can also have adverse environmental consequences. Many urban park and bushland activities also have the potential to disturb the environment - their effects being influenced by the type and popularity of the activity, the intensity of use, and the environmental characteristics of the recreational setting. Population pressure has led to the encroachment of environment *weeds* and feral animals into many of Australia's natural areas in suburbia.

With the growth in regional and cultural tourism, many local government authorities have used the marketing process to increase the usage of their significant recreation facilities. Visitors and sponsors alike are enticed not only by the attractions of the Great Barrier Reef Authority, situated off the north Queensland coast, but also the large aquarium, interpretative centre, and regular fishing trips out to the reef. Marketing parks to local businesses and the community have helped attract funds and community assistance to keep urban parks thriving. These programs are closely linked to corporate strategies to create jobs by stimulating economic development as well as increasing community awareness and involvement of the services and support for the parks and recreation agency in providing them. Communication tools such as banners, local radio and press, community planting days, direct mail, signs, outdoor advertising posters, videos and newsletters, have been used to encourage community involvement in programs and promote its success.

Parks have the capacity to host crowd-pulling events, an obvious attraction for sponsors. Summer festivals in Australia, such as Floriade in Canberra and Garden Week in Melbourne, attract many millions of people and have strong community support. Even fashion shows, brass bands, candles by candlelight at Christmas and car rallies, have been manipulated to a park's advantage to ensure their prominence and need by the community.

Many studies have shown that the Australian community values and appreciates parks and living green space. However describing these values in terms of worth, desirability or utility, is a complex matter, each including an economic, social, aesthetic, ecological and environmental component. In turn each comprises a range of benefits, some of which are quite tangible, for example the development of a favorable habitat, and perhaps quantifiable, such as the National Trust properties or a Vicswim (Victorian Council for the Teaching of Swimming and Water Safety). Other benefits are somewhat elusive, for example the benefits derived from enjoying an aesthetically pleasing setting, or riding a bike through a park. These components of value are also necessarily mutually exclusive. For example there are linkages between the aesthetic and social component in so far as the human element in the perception process. Similarly ecological and social values are linked at the most fundamental level.

Park, recreation and ecotourism has been described as one of the fastest growing industries in the world and is of major economic and social significance to all Australian States and Territories. Research has shown that, in terms of spending, holidays taken by people, to parks and gardens, are among the highest in Australia. The business plans, adopted by many states build on the pulling power of their natural attractions. Many millions of tourists and visitors nation-wide visit Australia's natural estate through its national and urban parks system, zoological and botanic gardens, arboreta and marine parks. Many other facilities, services and activities, associated with living green areas, such as Australia's alpine resorts, significant transport and viewing systems, and sporting facilities have now been targeted for promotion as significant features for the Australian and overseas visitor.

The economic significance of many recreation services and activities has not been studied to the same extent as many commercial operations. Victorian councils spend \$A136 million a year on the 5400 parks and reserves they own¹. A recent study on the economic significance of the Grampians National Park in

¹ Editor's note: It's not clear whether the author is referring to parks under local governments' freehold ownership or

Victoria showed that without the national park the local community would be worse off by \$A55 million a year. The study also revealed that the Grampians contribute \$A100 million a year to Victoria. Tourists stay, and spend on average \$A75 a day on food, accommodation and souvenirs. Without this particular National Park, this revenue could not be generated. Melbourne City's parks and gardens generate direct revenue of \$A3.3 million alone from its 10 million visitors per year. Suffice to say recreation in its many forms is a major socio-economic activity in the framework of the Australian community and its needs.

Australian vegetation also acts as a tourist attraction, to provide the towns and cities with separate unique characteristics, instead of poor imitations of cities elsewhere. Such is the case with Toowoomba, Queensland, known as Australia's Garden City, the National Rhododendron Society Gardens in Melbourne, Adelaide City Council's Rose Parade and Darwin's City Council's Palmetum.

More broadly the unique environmental values derived from urban vegetation and parkland can be categorised as quantitative or scientific. Living green vegetation, whether in the city, suburbia or in rural areas, maintains the natural processes in the world's life-support system, as well as enhancing the aesthetic and physical conditions of the urban environment, such as climatic amelioration and provision of space for recreational and educational use. Urban vegetation also provides for renewable and sustainable products in the form of seeds, flowers and plants from arboreta and urban forests.

Parks are considered the lungs of the city. Living green urban vegetation ameliorates urban living areas in regard to climate control, hydrology, air, noise and visual pollution reduction, wind control and water erosion, and is essential for dust entrapment and mud problems. Urban vegetation also serves as a natural screen against the direct rays of the sun, filter and absorbs air pollutants, improve air quality and "softens" the impact of human activity. Plant material also cools, filters and affects the humidity of the air that passes through, thus cooling city centres in summer bringing them closer to the temperature of the surrounding wooded countryside. Soil conservation, drainage and water supplies are often improved, leading to savings in sewerage, drainage and water supply, especially if they are linked to a water-recycling program.

Living green space also has a visual effect or impact, as well as environmental value. Native grasslands or bushland often has a ready-made visual effect, with special, natural character that reflects the locality. Parks also provide special landscape values, that reflect the cities natural environment in many different ways, and in many cases give it a sense of place. For example the Banksia woodlands are a particular feature of Western Australian coastal plain that reflects the infertile, sandy soils or North Queensland's Daintree forests that reflect the tropical climate of the region.

Increasingly Australian parks have another role, that of conservation. All living green space are now potentially valuable for biological conservation, particularly where parkland forms green corridors or network between bushland areas. Manifestations of these practices. include York Park in the Australian Capital Territory where native grasslands are conserved to maintain the habitat of the endangered moth (*Synemon plana*) and the Mt. Ainslie quarry in Canberra providing a suitable habitat for two species of uncommon fern. At the local level the value of biological diversity through streetscape plantings as a means of linking parks, reserves and transport corridors. In addition existing mature treed, or bushland areas also have additional conservation value in that they provide nesting hollows for birds and reptiles. Another value of urban vegetation in the cities streetscapes, parks and arboreta is for their seed or as gene banks.

Campers in three Queensland national parks, cited as their highest benefits amongst others; to have a break from the usual routine, to observe the beauty of nature, to explore new places, and to relax with family and friends. These social values include benefits primarily of a psychological and sociological nature. These benefits accrue at both the individual and community level, and are derived from direct experience of the park, or in "absentia", and contribute to the non-material aspects of the clients "quality of life". Urban vegetation and parkland provides an unconscious recreational value in our environment, that not only influences the communities productivity, but can also affect their psychological values and mental health. These values are generally the most tangible, and relate to such things as a sense of beauty or wonder, of spiritual uplifting. These values may be derived from experiencing the peaceful tranquility of a large park, or the visual experience' derived from inspecting an old significant and notable tree. An important part of these values is appreciation of the sense of

scale provided by features resident in parkland. Veteran trees, and other artifacts, well outlast a number of human lifespans and provide a link with past historical eras.

Jeff Floyd, General Manager of Melbourne's Parks and Gardens keenly emphasised the social role of parks as nature's cure-all:

"When a sports program keeps a teenager away from drugs; when a neighbourhood park offers a friendly gathering place for older people; when families learn to appreciate each other on a camping trip; when a jogger adds years to her or his life, how do we place a price on ? The value is life itself."

Sunday Magazine, November, 1994

More importantly, it is becoming apparent that urban vegetation can contribute to increased health and well-being. Australian research focused on one important function of parks in relation to emotional health by allowing people in a fast paced society to experience emotions that are related to positive health. One of these is a mood state of relaxation which is often associated with a slower experience of time, the other with pleasant arousal. Interesting findings showed that the use of parks was clearly associated with pleasant relaxation or pleasant arousal. Parkland has been used as an escape from modern city living, as well as stress reduction in individuals. The clean, cool natural greenness provides a pleasant environment in which to live and work. These aesthetic values are of increasing importance to the mental health of modern man because of the rapid life style and increasing urbanisation.

In addition to being something we perceive, parks and other green space is also something we also experience. Parks and gardens are almost universally associated with positive moods, giving scent, delight, reflection, serenity and quality relaxation. Open green space also known to stimulate creation, self-expression, and stimulate competitiveness. Parks provide for record of settlement, fashion and attitudes and concepts. Significant and notable trees, rotundas, fountains, monuments and statues, greenhouses, garden beds, horticultural therapy centres, can be used to discern the way the city has grown and developed since settlement. Thus this record of human activity in its public green space is important to the overall quality of life in the city with many attitudes to parks and parkland strongly influenced by our traditions and forefathers. Although less well documented, or documented in a "popular" rather than a scientific manner, these values are no less important than those with a scientific basis.

ends