

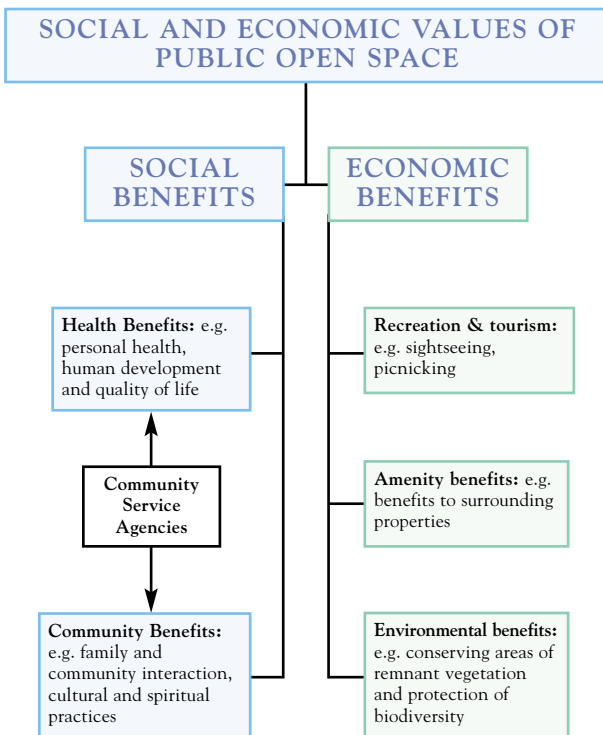
# The Value of Public Open Space for Community Service Provision

**Sydney  
Urban  
Parks  
Education &  
Research Group**

## BACKGROUND

State-funded public open space ('public open space') in Sydney and Melbourne comprises large open space venues managed by State government agencies for community use. Examples include Bicentennial Park, Centennial Park, Parramatta Regional Park, the Royal Botanic Gardens, and Western Sydney Regional Park in Sydney, and Wattle Park in Melbourne.

Public open space generates a wide range of social and economic values for individuals, groups and the wider community, as shown below.



A number of State Government community service agencies regularly use public open space in the provision of their programs, such as the NSW Department of Health (e.g. as part of its Public Education Program), the Department of Education (e.g. through Environmental Education Centres), and the Department of Sport and Recreation. The provision of public open space provides benefits for these agencies, as it enables them to avoid incurring additional costs associated with having to use alternative venues for delivering their programs.

## ASSESSING THE BENEFITS OF PUBLIC OPEN SPACE

In order to determine the nature and value of these benefits for community service agencies, the Sydney Urban Parks Education and Research Group (the SUPER Group) commissioned consultants Hassall and Associates to:

1. identify broad socio-economic, environmental and political trends and issues that may influence the community service benefits of public open space;
2. assess the level of awareness of public sector community service agencies about the contribution of public open space to the delivery of their programs;
3. identify the contribution that public open space makes to the delivery of community services; and
4. estimate the economic contribution of public open space to community service provision.

This study was carried out with the support of Parks Victoria, and Parks and Leisure Australia (Victoria), and is believed to be the first of its kind in Australia.

### Sydney Urban Parks Education and Research Group (SUPER Group)

The Sydney Urban Parks Education and Research Group (SUPER Group) was established in January 1998 to provide a strategic integrated approach to urban park research in Sydney. SUPER Group members are: Bicentennial Park Trust; Centennial Park & Moore Park Trust; National Parks and Wildlife Service; Parramatta Regional Park Trust; Olympic Coordination Authority; Royal Botanic Gardens & Domain Trust; and the University of Technology, Sydney (School of Leisure and Tourism Studies).

The key objectives of the SUPER Group are to:

- facilitate information exchange between Greater Sydney urban park managers;
- undertake joint research projects in urban park management;
- develop and promote other opportunities for research and educational excellence in urban parks management; and
- develop an understanding of the values and benefits of open space in government and the leisure industry.

This brochure summarises the results of the study. Details of how to obtain a copy of the technical report based on this research are given at the end of this brochure.

## THE APPROACH

This study involved three broad stages:

- identifying State Government agencies which depend on public open space for delivery of their programs;
- undertaking interviews with agency representatives to collect information on trends and issues, and financial information on specific program costs and benefits; and
- estimating the economic benefits of public open space for community service agencies for three case study locations, and for the Sydney and Melbourne Metropolitan regions as a whole.

### Collecting the Data

Interviews were carried out with representatives of NSW and Victorian government agencies identified as having programs using public open space, to collect information on:

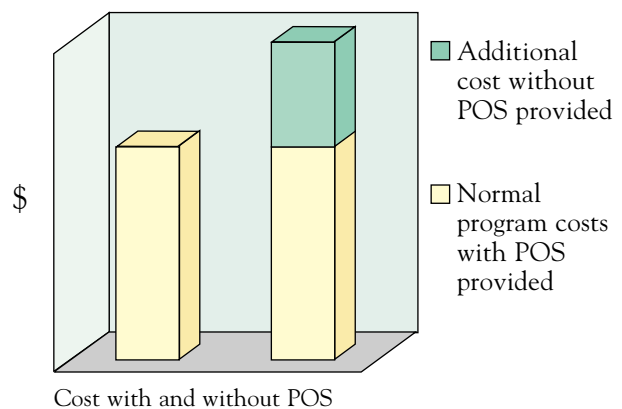
- public open space venues used by community service agencies;
- specific agency programs using public open space;
- the role of public open space in these programs;
- the annual cost of identified programs for 1999/2000;
- alternative arrangements in the absence of public open space; and
- estimated additional costs to implement these programs without public open space.

### Estimating the Economic Benefits of Public Open Space

The economic benefits of public open space for the provision of community services were estimated by considering the programs delivered, and the different levels of expenditure that would be incurred 'with' and 'without' public open space being available. This is known as an **Avoided Cost** approach. In this study,

avoided costs consist mainly of additional time, extra transport costs, and resource costs associated with redesigning program materials. Avoided costs are calculated as the additional amount that the agencies would have to pay for their programs to be delivered, if public open space areas were not available. In this way, an avoided cost represents an economic benefit. The concept of avoided cost, as it applies to public open space, is shown in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: A graphical representation of avoided costs for agency use of Public Open Space (POS).**



## RESULTS

### 1. What factors are influencing the demand for, and the supply of, public open space?

The study identified trends and issues which are likely to influence the demand for, and supply of, public open space in metropolitan areas. These include the following.

- Continued population growth (at a minimum of 1% per year for at least the next 5 years for Sydney and Melbourne).
- Changing demographics. The Australian population is aging, and thus the nature of demand for open spaces is changing, as the elderly have very little participation in active sports. Instead, outdoor recreation focuses more on walking for pleasure.
- Urban consolidation.
- Importance of outdoor physical activities.
- Greater prominence being given to ecological benefits and conservation values.

## 2. Do community service agencies recognise the value of public open space for program delivery?

There was a high level of awareness and enthusiasm among community service providers interviewed for this study about the importance of public open space for the delivery of agency programs.

## 3. How does public open space contribute to public sector community service provision?

Interviewees noted that public open space contributed to:

- decreased health care costs, due to physical activity;
- reduced capital investment from avoiding the need to develop facilities already provided;
- additional program flexibility, through the provision of a wide range of resource choices;
- opportunities for Commonwealth agencies such as universities and non-government organisations, to undertake educational, sporting and religious events; and
- reduced or avoided crime, through the use of public open space for the rehabilitation of minor offenders.

The study also identified that public open space provides:

- opportunities for activity for older people;
- supervised childcare;
- health improvement and fitness motivation;
- education in sport, environment and other topics;
- individual development;
- space for students of all ages to learn about the natural environment; and
- conservation of remnant vegetation.

## 4. What is the economic contribution of public open space to community service provision?

This was calculated through examining three case studies in Sydney and Melbourne, and deriving estimates of avoided costs for metropolitan Sydney and Melbourne.

## CASE STUDIES

### Centennial Parklands

Centennial Parklands in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs, comprises Centennial Park, Moore Park and Queen's Park, with a total area of over 354 hectares.

Centennial Parklands has more than 5 million visitors per year, who carry out a wide range of activities including golf, barbecues, picnics, walks, sporting pursuits, and bike riding. Facilities include gardens, a wetland, nature trails, bush tucker trails, birdwatching and food outlets.

Major users of the area are the NSW Department of Sport and Recreation, and NSW Department of Education and Training (Schools).

Local schools actively use the parks' facilities and open spaces, with an average school week having over 200 oval bookings, for an average time of 2 hours. This represents an important sporting facility for local schools. School environmental programs also use the parks, with around 100 field excursions per year. The study identified Centennial Parklands as providing an annual avoided cost for community service agencies of \$4.0M.

### Western Sydney Regional Park

Western Sydney Regional Park is located 30km from the Sydney CBD at Horsley Park, and currently covers about 600 hectares; when fully developed, the park will cover 1000 hectares. Recreational facilities in the park include playgrounds; walking and cycling paths; extended tracks for long-distance walkers; horse riding trails; open space and kickabout playing surfaces. The park contains the Fairfield City Farm, the Sydney International Equestrian Centre (SIEC), and the Olympic Mountain Biking Course (OBMC).

Park rangers assist Fairfield City Farm in the farm's environmental education program for schools. School groups from the region use the park for environmental education field trips (tree planting, nature walks, etc.), cross-country races and general excursions. Disability groups frequently use the park's facilities, as does the NSW Department of Juvenile Justice for skills development classes for young

offenders. The study identified this venue as providing an annual avoided cost for community service agencies of \$0.25M per year.

### Wattle Park

Wattle Park in Melbourne is a 60-hectare recreation area that encloses a nine-hole golf course; a chalet used for weddings, meetings and conferences; a cricket oval; walking tracks; natural bushland; and a playground area. The Park receives approximately 500,000 visitors per annum. Local people use the park for walking and picnicking; other regular users include university groups who use the area as part of their environmental studies, and school students who use the playground and activity areas. The park also hosts occasional fun runs.

The main State government agency dependant on Wattle Park for the delivery of its programs is the Victorian Department of Education. The Department estimated that the annual avoided cost of using the park would be \$0.2M per year. This was mainly made up of the significant additional travel time to the (limited) alternative sites, which would be incurred in the absence of the park.

## AVOIDED COSTS (SAVINGS) FOR METROPOLITAN REGIONS

Data was obtained from community service agency representatives on program costs with, and without, access to public open space. Avoided costs for the Sydney and Melbourne metropolitan regions as a whole were estimated by adding all the individual additional program costs that would be incurred without access to public open space. Thus, the total avoided cost in the Greater Sydney region was estimated as between \$10.6M-\$14.6M per year. Avoided costs for the Greater Melbourne Region were estimated as being between \$4.4M and \$4.5M.

The study suggested that program costs would increase by 55% to 75% if public open space were not provided.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC OPEN SPACE MANAGEMENT

The study identifies a number of implications for public open space managers, including the following:

- \* Multi-use pressures on parks will continue to increase with changes in urban demographics.
- \* There is a need to develop strategies to meet the needs of different groups, especially the aged, and educational users.
- \* Managers should capitalise on the high level of awareness among community service agencies about the important role that public open space can play in the delivery of specific community service programs.
- \* Public open space managers should pursue joint research initiatives with organisations that use and benefit from public open space.

### SUPER GROUP INFORMATION

A technical report on the Value of Public Open Space for Community Service Provision is available from:

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For more information about the SUPER Group and its research program please contact:

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