

The recreational value of urban parks in the Veneto Region (Italy)

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The importance of urban public parks in producing a great number of benefits for the inhabitants is nowadays widely accepted (Kaplan 2001). Urban green areas improve the physical and the psychological wellbeing of the citizens and, as a consequence, they affect house prices, especially in dense urban settlements. The value of urban parks can be estimated using the contingent valuation method (CVM), (Dwyer 1989, Tyrväinen & Väänänen 1998, Tyrväinen 2001, del Saz Salazar & Mendez 2007) and the hedonic pricing approach (More et al. 1988, Tyrväinen 1997, Poudyal et al. 2006). The first approach measures the recreational benefits of the people living in a wide area surrounding the park, whereas in the second method the price of the houses is affected essentially by the green areas that can be seen through the windows (Bourassa et al. 2004). Despite the limits of the CVM (Baker et al. 2008), it has been argued that in the case of familiar goods this approach gives unbiased estimates (MacMillan et al. 2006).

To analyse the demand for urban parks in the Veneto Region, five research projects have been undertaken using the same methodology. The first one was carried out in a green space of the city of Padova in 1996. From 2005 to 2009, four studies were undertaken in three small towns (Montebelluna, Castelfranco and Monselice) and in a rural municipality (Cervarese Santa Croce). The parks are quite different from each other. The park of Padova is very recent (1991) and is located in the suburbs, outside the city. On the other hand, the park of Castelfranco is the garden of an historical Venetian villa (Villa Bolasco) and it is near the medieval walls of the city. The parks of Montebelluna and Monselice occupy two areas that in the past belonged to two historical mansions, but they have been deeply modified in recent years. They are located inside the towns. Finally, the park of Cervarese Santa Croce is located in the countryside, in front of a thirteenth century castle, and it has been recently created through the diversion of a river. With the exception of Cervarese Santa Croce, all the green spaces are equipped with playgrounds and other recreational facilities. The surface area of the public parks ranges from 2 to 6 hectares and they can be considered representative of the whole regional situation.

More than 200 interviews were collected in each park. The recreational value has been estimated by means of the contingent valuation method. The open-ended format was used. The interviewees were asked to state their maximum willingness to pay for an entrance ticket to continue visiting the park in the future without reducing the number of visits per year.

The average number of visits per year is very high in the case of the city of Padova (58) and Montebelluna (44), whereas it is lower in the other towns. The number of trips per year depends on the characteristics of the green spaces, the period in which the parks are open to public and also the population density. In the municipalities where the population density is lower, people travel more to reach the parks and make a lower number of visits per year. There also is an inverse relationship between the average distance travelled and the percentage of people that drive to reach the park. About 70% drive in the rural municipality, whereas about two-thirds walk and cycle in the urban areas.

The willingness to pay (WTP) was deflated and expressed in constant prices for 2009. The WTP ranges from €0.90 (Monselice) to €2.79 (Castelfranco). To compare the recreational value of the five public parks, the total benefits per hectare were calculated. The recreational value is higher in the city of Padova (€18,748 per hectare per year) and lower in the rural municipality of Cervarese

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Santa Croce (€1,535 per hectare per year). An inverse relationship exists between the total WTP per hectare, per day of opening, and the density of the population living in the five municipalities considered. The recreational value of the land is greater than that of the agricultural one in the rural areas as well. This suggests that the urban sprawl does not reduce the demand for public parks. In the urban areas the recreational value is more or less equal to that of the land suitable for development and it is eight to ten times higher than that in the rural areas. From this point of view it is possible to suppose that urban sprawl causes a reduction in the efficiency of the public expenditure in this field.

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