

73 Visitor monitoring during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Parks Victoria's Charter is to manage National, State and Metropolitan parks and waterways, recreational boating facilities, jetties and piers and other recreation, and tourist assets. This makes up approximately 18 percent of all land in Victoria, Australia, with more than 100 million visits to parks, bays and piers every year.

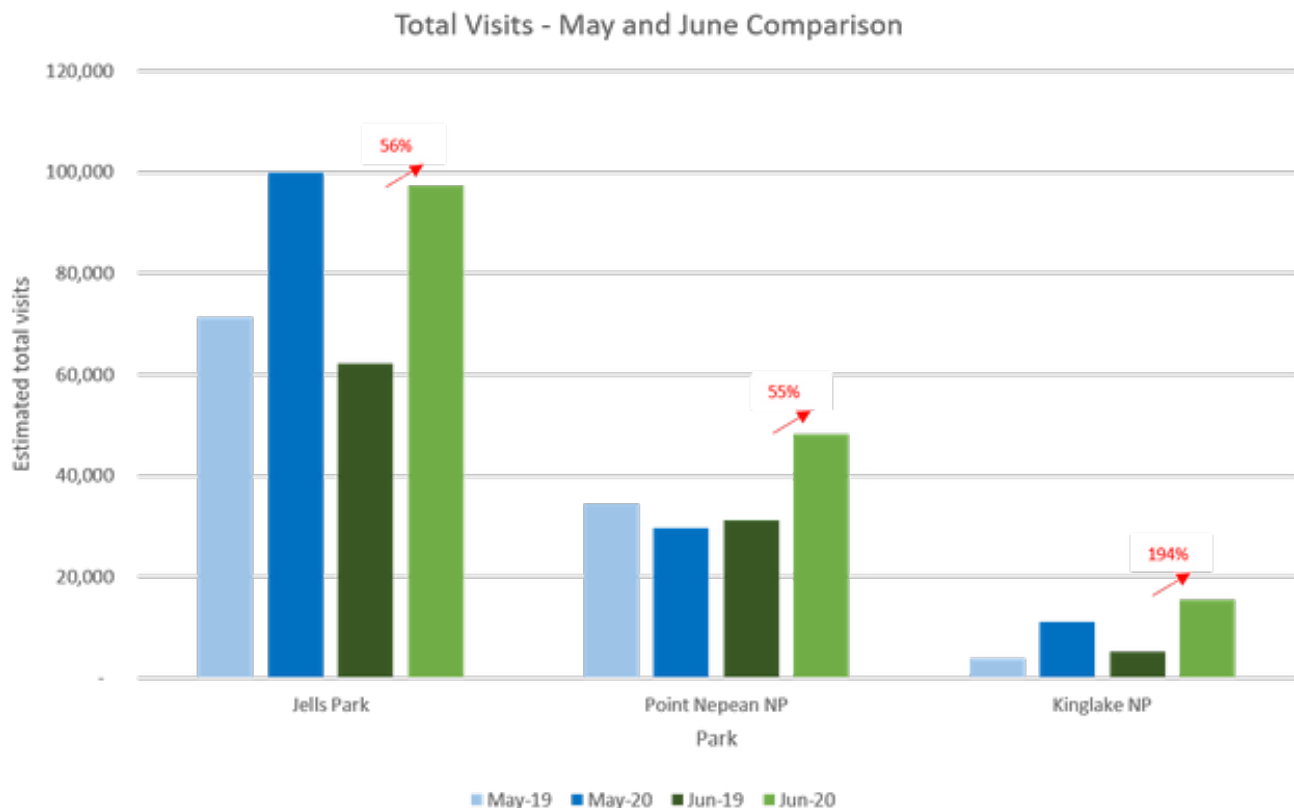
In 2020, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, visitor monitoring became increasingly important in park management and decision making to ensure health and safety protocols were enacted in park to prevent further community outbreaks. During the COVID-19 restriction periods, staff and visitor monitoring documented changes in visitor use and numbers in the park system. Understanding the wellbeing benefits of being in nature as has been documented in past research, Parks Victoria wanted to examine the physical, emotional and social wellbeing benefits of being in nature and how this had changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This presentation displays two key research areas to understand the changes to visitation and ways in which Victorians used parks and protected areas during the COVID-19 Pandemic:

1. Park based visitor monitoring
2. Impact of COVID-19 on park usage applied research project

Park based visitor monitoring

Parks Victoria determines accurate visitation statistics for individual parks using vehicle and pedestrian counters. For parks with visitor nodes accessed primarily by road, permanent or temporary remote download vehicle counters provide accurate visitation estimates. The majority of parks saw decreases in annual visitation for the 2019/20 financial year due to impacts of bushfires and COVID-19. The Black Summer bushfires over January and February 2020 had an impact on visits to regional parks, with sites such as Buchan Caves closed during



Graph 1: May and June 19/20 monthly comparison

the peak summer season. While there were decreases in annual visits at the majority of monitored parks due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions triggering park closures, several parks saw significant increases in visits during the months of May and June 2020. Point Nepean National Park, Kinglake National Park and Jells Park all saw large increases in visits in the immediate period after restrictions were lifted, end of May and June 2020. Jells Park, Dandenong Ranges Botanic Garden, Point Nepean National Park, Tower Hill Wildlife Reserve, Macedon Regional Park, Wilsons Promontory National Park and Kinglake National Park all saw increases in visits in June, the initial post lockdown restrictions period, suggesting the importance of parks during this time.

Impact of COVID-19 on park usage applied research project

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has made significant changes to the way Victorians use public parks and protected areas. Parks Victoria in partnership with Colmar Brunton, investigated changes in park usage and the impact this had on wellbeing. The study also quantified concerns and expectations Victorians had about using parks and protected areas for future planning.

Finding displayed that most Victorians avoided parks and protected areas during periods of lockdown (73%). Of those that did go to visit sites during lockdown, visitors typically spent less time than usual and came for short walks rather than longer stays for activities such as sightseeing. There were several concerns about visiting parks and protected areas identified by participants. Top concerns of visiting parks and protected areas during lockdown included; contributing to another outbreak (39%) and being unable to maintain social distancing in busy areas (38%). Positively, three in five who visited parks and protected areas during lockdown felt it had a positive impact to their mental and physical health (62% and 61% respectively) and two in five felt it was positive for their social health (41%). Victorians aged over 55 were significantly more likely to state that both their physical and mental health were positively impacted by being able to visit parks and protected areas during lockdown (83% and 81% respectively). Considering those who did not visit parks during

lockdown, one in four felt that non-visitation had a negative impact to both physical and mental health (24% and 27% respectively). Visitation was expected to increase to levels seen prior to lockdown once restrictions lifted. In order to assure Victorians that parks are safe, one in three said they would like to see social distancing enforced at parks (37%) and slightly fewer would also like to see staff monitoring the number of visitors in parks (28%).

Over two in five Victorians believed Parks Victoria performed well during the pandemic (46%) and less than one in twenty considered the response to have been poor (4%). Further, three in five Victorians agree that closing public spaces was the right response (63%) fewer than one in ten perceive that this was the wrong decision (8%). Most Victorians also agreed that parks and protected areas should continue to receive investment even during times of economic recession (58%) fewer than one in twenty disagree with this sentiment (4%).

Management implications

Parks Victoria employed visitor number data in active planning with the pandemic response strategic intelligence unit to preserve public health. Due to high visitor use recorded, poor compliance and inability to socially distance, the decision was made to close certain parks for varying periods throughout the pandemic response. Predictive analytics were also conducted to assist in park management and planning for reopening parks. This included determining peak times of day when certain sites would be at capacity for the ability to socially distance, ensuring traffic management and compliance controls would be in place during these periods. The impact of COVID-19 research displayed the importance and wellbeing benefits of parks to the community and informed areas Parks Victoria could focus on to encourage Victorians to connect with nature. The data also suggested park visitation would be likely to increase in the post lockdown period, a trend that was captured with vehicle monitoring when this occurred.