

Understanding and fostering local community support for protected areas engulfed by urban sprawl

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Introduction

It is generally well accepted that engaging local communities in protected area management improves conservation outcomes (Reed 2008). Engaging and supporting communities living around areas of high biodiversity to value these places as their own and support their protection helps to ensure protected area objectives are met. This has been well demonstrated particularly in developing countries, where attitudes and perceptions of communities towards neighboring protected areas are increasingly being considered in both the establishment and management of national parks (Anthony 2007; Andrade and Rhodes 2012).

Peri-urban landscapes are the transitional zones between urban metropolitan areas and the rural hinterland. In many parts of the globe, these areas are undergoing rapid land use change as a result of urban expansion (Simon 2008). Continuing urban growth results in significant land use changes and as a consequence, protected areas that may have previously been considered remote, are becoming surrounded by housing development. Management of these protected areas needs to adapt to the rapidly expanding urban boundaries and increasing population sizes that in turn change the usage and pressure on the parks.

This study examined the awareness and perceptions of the conservation values of a local community living in newly developed suburbs on the southwestern urban fringe of Melbourne, Australia. The suburbs border a series of Ramsar listed wetlands, a coastal park and foreshore reserves managed by the Victorian protected area management authority. The wetlands and coastal park in the study area have high biodiversity values, provide important habitat for a variety of fauna species, including migrating birds and support a number of different vegetation communities. Previous studies have shown that increasing urbanization has resulted in a more visitors and a subsequent rise in unauthorized activities and potentially harmful use (Antos et al., 2007). The primary aims of this study were to 1) to explore the local communities awareness, perception, attitudes and usage of the local parks and 2) identify potential compelling messages and triggers that can influence local resident attitudes and behavior.

Methods

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to explore the relationship between local residents and the parks, and to identify suitable management strategies for improving community engagement with the protected areas. The qualitative component of the research involved six focus groups, with a mix of residential property owners, park users and local rural landholders. The quantitative component included a telephone survey of 400 local residents, aged over 18 years. Both users and non-users of the parks were targeted for the survey.

Results

Results showed that overall the local community did not regard the parks as an area of conservation significance. Wetlands were not linked with wildlife or biodiversity and often viewed negatively. For community members living in close proximity to the protected area, awareness of Ramsar was very low, even among users of the parks. The majority of users were not familiar with the term Ramsar or its international significance. When provided with a definition of a Ramsar site, over half of the respondents had positive (62%) response the local parks being Ramsar sites. When informed of the high conservation significance of the parks, 97% of users indicated a willingness to change behavior that was having a negative impact. There was an overall positive attitude to being responsible and respecting park values. Increasing the profile of the area through targeted communications and informative signage are potential tool for raising community awareness.

Conclusions

A key challenge for the future of the parks will be the ability of managers to foster a sense of stewardship for protected areas amongst the communities that live around its borders. This is particularly critical in this peri-urban area where urban growth is proceeding directly adjacent to the parks at a rapid rate. The difficulty for park management is that many of the new residents of these developments have little knowledge the natural values being protected within the Ramsar site and surrounding parks, or understanding of how they can be involved in maintaining these values. Giving the local community a contributory role in the narrative of the park can help to engender pride and potentially encourage greater social responsibility for these important protected areas.



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