

Developing the useability index for the Swan Canning Riverpark

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The Swan River Trust is a Western Australian government agency charged with protecting and managing the Swan Canning river system that winds its way through the capital city of Perth. The Trust is required to manage, monitor and report on river health and community benefits derived from use of 72km² of public land and river reserve identified as Swan Canning Riverpark.

The Useability Index was developed to provide a set of indicators to assess the quality and amenity of parks and recreation reserves managed for public access within the Swan Canning Riverpark. Results can be assessed for each site, a group of sites or particular type of site and provides an indication of the diversity and extent of reserves and their capacity to contribute to community health and well-being.

The concept of “useability” was drawn from a PhD study that explored perceptions of nearby green spaces and self-reported health where it was found that people who perceived nearby green spaces as “useable” were twice as likely to report better general health. (Carter, 2009). Integration of quantitative and qualitative data collected in this study enabled several common elements of “useable” green spaces to be identified. It was determined that useable green spaces need to:

- be in good condition (look cared for);
- be well-equipped for visiting (be welcoming, with paths, obvious access points and community infrastructure);
- include places where people can relax;
- include places where people can meet others;
- be connected to the neighbourhood, both physically and emotionally (be a part of, not apart from);
- offer personal security (feel safe, other people around, not isolated unless by choice); and
- meet the needs of multiple users (different settings to meet different needs and expectations).

Indicators selected for inclusion were based on the findings of this research, review of similar assessment tools and related literature. In particular, aspects of assessment included in three other tools were considered as part of the initial development process. Suggestions for open space assessment provided by researchers involved in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment included:

- Recreational opportunities provided;
- Landscape condition;
- Presence of sites, landscapes or species with spiritual or cultural significance; and
- Presence of site or species of scientific or educational value (Ash et al., 2010).

A local tool, entitled the Quality of Public Open Space Tool (POST) was developed to audit park facilities and features

(University of Western Australia, 2004). POST can be used to assess the quality of a specified area of public open space through accumulated scores for:

- Type of usage and activity options;
- Environmental quality including presence of water and other natural features, trees and shade, pathways and evidence of care through regular maintenance and lack of graffiti, vandalism or litter;
- Amenities such as playgrounds, picnic facilities, parking, toilets and public transport; and
- Safety, particularly lighting and visibility.

Elements of one further tool, SpaceShaper, developed by the UK Commission for Architecture and Built Environment were also considered (CABE, 2007). Eight aspects of open space quality are explored within the SpaceShaper toolkit:

- Access (finding your way and getting about);
- Use (what activities and opportunities the space has to offer);
- Other people (how the space caters for different needs);
- Maintenance (how clean and cared for the space is);
- Environment (how safe and comfortable the space is);
- Design and appearance (what the space looks like and what materials it uses);
- Community (how important the space is to local people); and
- You (how the space makes you feel).

Aspects of many of these elements can be seen in the table provided. Table 1 includes descriptions of the various layers of the Useability Index – from its overarching themes to individual assessment items and the aspects of each that are considered during each site assessment. Assessment items can score a maximum of ten (10) points with maximum total score of 100.

Used alongside ecological health indicators, assessment of potential community benefit through the Useability Index can provide rationale for management intervention and investment. To extend its application within park planning and management processes, the current site assessment process includes mapping the location and extent of different types of places within the Riverpark. This data is being included in the Western Australian Department of Environment and Conservation Asset Management system and Index elements are aligned with aspects of visitor satisfaction surveys to enable comparison of perceptions held by land managers and park users.

This presentation will discuss the development and current application of the Useability Index for the Swan Can-

Table I. Descriptions of themes, components and assessment items included in the Useability Index for the Swan Canning Riverpark

| Themes | Components | Assessment items |
|---|--|--|
| CONNECTION How emotionally connected might people be to this site? | AESTHETICS The visual appeal of natural elements and the overall appearance of each site plays an important role in developing community connection and encouraging use | Natural appeal Appealing water quality (clean, clear and odourless) Presence of endemic trees and/or riparian vegetation Presence of wildlife/wildlife habitat Attractive river and cross-river views |
| | | Site condition Attractive general condition Appears cared for and maintained to appropriate standard No obvious long-term graffiti, litter or damage |
| | ATTACHMENT Engendering "a sense of place" and emotional attachment to cultural, spiritual or historical connections and landscape features plays an important role in willingness to visit, care for and protect river parklands | Visitation & involvement Well visited (known or observed) Volunteer or other community involvement in caring for site or site infrastructure |
| | | Sense of place Known spiritual, cultural or historical significance (Noongar and/or contemporary) Presence of significant landscape features (such as river cliffs or beaches) Well-placed interpretive materials |
| FUNCTION How well does this site function as a destination for relaxation, recreation or specific activity? | ACTIVITY INFRASTRUCTURE Appropriate activity infrastructure enables people to engage in a variety of physical activity, recreational pastimes, social gatherings and community events | Activity spectrum Site appropriate range of opportunity and infrastructure to enable engagement in land and water-based activity |
| | | Comfort & safety Well-maintained site-appropriate facilities (such as toilets, shade and shelter, seating, BBQ and picnic areas) Easy to navigate (appropriate signage, pathways and/or lighting) Natural surveillance (line of sight) where appropriate |
| | ACTIVITY AMENITY People seek appealing and amenable places where they can relax, reflect, meet others and socialise with family and friends | Relaxation & reflection Variety of places where people can relax, reflect or spend quiet time. Appropriate ambient noise level Placement of activity infrastructure limits disruption or conflict from other users |
| | | Social interaction Comfortable spaces where people can gather Placement and design of facilities and infrastructure to enhance opportunities for positive social interaction |
| | ACCESS Ease of access to areas within the site (such as pedestrian linkages to different areas), and access to the site (how people can get there) determines how well parklands can be used by visitors | Land access Appropriate pedestrian/cycle access within site Pedestrian and vehicle linkage to surrounding areas (including public transport to regional sites) Appropriate placement of parking and vehicle access within or adjacent to site |
| | | Water access Water access (entry and egress) for people and watercraft (including beach, bank, ramps, jetties or other access ways) |

ning Riverpark and potential adaptation for its use in other park contexts.

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