

Societal & park recreation trends in Victoria, Australia

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Keywords: society, recreation, trends, parks

Australian society has been and will continue to experience demographic and other changes that will ultimately affect how people visit parks in the future. In the state of Victoria, these trends include ageing population, increasing cultural diversity, changing work patterns and household types, population and urban growth, health awareness, climate change, and the desire for convenient and safe experiences (Parks Victoria 2002, Department of Sustainability and Environment 2006, Curtis et al. 2007, Whitelaw et al. 2007, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009). Many of these trends are common to other states in Australia as well as other western countries (Gartner & Lime 2000, Manning 2000, California State Parks 2005, Eagles 2007). So how will these trends shape the public's use of parks into the future? This research was aimed at assessing changes in activities, the need for facilities and visit barriers, and relating those to dominant trends in society. This will help to ensure that parks remain socially relevant and that managers provide for the future park needs of society.

This quantitative research study used stated preferences and intentions of a thousand Victorians using an internet panel survey. The research project is a collaboration between Monash University's Tourism Research Unit and Parks Victoria. The project involves two overall areas of investigation. First, respondents were asked:

- What park activities do you think you will be undertaking more frequently in ten years time?
- What park facilities do you think will become more important to you in ten years time?
- What barriers to visiting parks do you think will become more likely for you in ten years time?

The results concerning future activities and facilities highlight expectations of parks as safe and accessible spaces that offer opportunities for socialising, relaxing and light activities such as sightseeing and short walks. In contrast, activities and facilities in areas such as jogging, bike riding, team sports, long walks, children's play and camping were not rated so highly. In the context of future barriers to park use, health constraints, personal safety concerns, a lack of accessible parks, crowding and unpredictable weather events were the most frequent responses. These results provide some insights into the "what" question.

The second area of investigation was interested in the "why" component. In other words, what socio-demographic characteristics and population and recreation trends were predictive of respondent's nominated activities, facilities and barriers with specific population and recreation trends taking place in Victoria? Analyses of these results have highlighted how key trends such as ageing, health awareness, changing work patterns, population growth, safety expectations and climate change will influence certain types of activities and facilities expected in parks, as well as barriers to future park use. For example, increases in vigorous activities were positively associated with health awareness, while the trend of increasing cultural diversity was positively associated with social activities such as picnics and playing with children. Lower energy activities such as sightseeing and relaxing were positively associated with the trend of getting older.

Similarly, facilities had associations with specific trends. For example, seating and car access facilities, public transport and wheel chair access were all positively associated with the trend of getting older. Trends in health awareness were positively related to facilities that enable physical

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activity such as grass areas, trails for walking and cycling, and areas for walking dogs. The need for signage and interpretation was positively related to increasing cultural diversity.

Finally, barriers and trends were analysed. The getting older trend was positively associated to barriers such as physical constraints, not being able to drive and not having company to visit the park. Increasing cultural diversity trend was positively related to crowding, recreational conflicts and lack of information about parks. Health awareness trends were positively related to barriers such as physical constraints and personal safety.

Personal benefits obtained from park visitation are a key element to societal acceptance and approval of parks (Eagles 2007, Buckley 2009). As Victoria's population changes, knowing how these changes will influence future park use and needs will be a core ingredient to ensuring that Victoria's system of parks and reserves remains socially relevant to its population. In the absence of this knowledge, there is a danger that managers will miss opportunities and fail to address challenges inherent to the future management of parks.

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