National Position Paper
Parkland
A Position Paper for the profession

This Position Paper summarises Parks & Leisure Australia’s response to current issues associated with parkland, and has been prepared for parks and leisure professionals. A complementary advocacy Position Paper exists to suit political and other decision-makers.

Definition

In this context ‘Parkland’ refers to settings ranging from open areas (usually grassed for unstructured leisure activities and play) through to bushland, coastal reserves and foreshores, and includes associated (normally low-key) facilities such as seating, shelters, barbeques, playgrounds as well as trails. In appropriate locations these can also include associated commercial activities such as café facilities. Parkland is intended to refer to all park areas other than sporting spaces (and their associated facilities) and, in many instances, will feature as part of a broader sporting precinct. Parkland includes water features like ponds and wetlands. In some settings the Parkland may be complementary to heritage buildings. Parkland also includes areas where by their very existence any parkland use is secondary (e.g. stormwater retarding/detention basins, school grounds, and sporting fields) where the prime activity has precedence but at times, when not in such use, the area may be utilized and accessible for casual recreation (e.g. kite flying, dog exercise).

In such settings people can variously enjoy the outdoors (individually and in company) for casual physical activities, community gatherings, appreciation of nature, and to help protect local biodiversity and natural area values through volunteering (for environmental and associated heritage activities). Activities may range from walking, cycling, dog walking, picnicking, impromptu play, exploring natural features, enjoying scenic landscapes and bird watching, through to participation in outdoor events and festivals.

Parkland has three main subsets: open spaces, formal gardens and natural areas. These may exist individually, but more usually in some combination to provide diversity, suit usage and enhance aesthetics.

- **Open Spaces**: Predominantly grassed areas for free ranging adult and child relaxation, recreation and play, but can also include inland water bodies – e.g. lakes where boating, model boating or sailing can occur. Associated facilities (pathways, linear trails, seating, shelters, drinking fountains, barbeques, playgrounds, toilets etc.) often support these activities.
- **Formal Gardens**: Ornamental plantings of trees and plants provided primarily for public enjoyment, education and sometimes for heritage reasons. Ornamental ponds and fountains would also fit in this subset.
- **Natural Areas**: Normally indigenously vegetated areas like bushland, native grasslands, coastal areas, wetlands, riparian vegetation and also geological features like rock formations and waterfalls providing places for biodiversity and habitat. These places may also have indigenous cultural significance.
Note:
1. Where major facilities like aquatic centres and sports grounds are sited within broader Parkland settings, this document only seeks to address the Parkland component.
2. Parks created and managed under Federal and State legislation (e.g. National and State parks, conservation reserves) are excluded from this Position Paper.
3. PLA has prepared a separate Position Paper on Sports Spaces.

Current Status
Whilst Parkland as described above is readily recognized for passive recreation, such areas have important, though less overt, values such as providing ‘escape’ places from noise and crowds, proven remediation for stress and depression, and attractive places for community gathering and well-being. Particularly relevant to the discussion is the work of Tuan on Topophilia, or a sense of place (Tuan 1990) and Wilson on Biophilia, which is the instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems (Wilson 1984).

Growth in urban populations is leading to increasing urban density as a result of higher rise development and smaller allotment size. To date there has been little corresponding allowance for the provision of Parkland, especially in areas of urban renewal.

At the same time, in our increasingly sedentary lifestyle and longer working hours, our health is suffering with growing concerns and costs regarding mental health, obesity and associated heart disease health. Yet there is ample evidence in Australia and internationally to indicate that ‘contact with nature’ and outdoor exercise can offer effective low-cost preventative and remedial responses.

Throughout Australia there are many differing opinions and practices regarding the desirable mix, size and distribution of Parkland, additionally inconsistent terminology (for example neighbourhood parks, district parks, and regional parks, etc.) increases confusion across regions and states.

The Facts
Parkland is not just nice to have - it should be viewed as an essential component of urban infrastructure. The health, wellbeing, social, economic and environmental benefits of quality Parkland are many and significant.

Health and well-being benefits to people:
- Encouraging participation in physical activity;
- Enhancing physical and mental health, and is an essential component for children’s healthy development;
- Helping to reduce the risk of chronic disease; and
- Assisting in recovery from stress and mental fatigue.
Social benefits to communities:
- Building stronger and connected communities through the provision of leisure opportunities and places where people come together for social and volunteer purposes;
- Supporting social cohesion and inclusion;
- Improving liveability in urban environments; and
- Providing bushfire refuge sites during emergencies.

Environmental benefits:
- Providing biodiversity and ecosystem services;
- Reducing temperature levels by up to 8°C through shade from trees and reducing the heat sink effect;
- Attenuating wind speeds;
- Removing pollutants;
- Sequestering carbon;
- Playing a critical role in storm water management (cleaning storm water, slowing its movement and absorbing water during intense rainfall events); and
- Recharging groundwater by being permeable sinks.

Economic benefits:
- Health savings attributed to the low-cost benefits outlined above;
- The low-cost climate change and other environmental offsets described above;
- Positive influence on house prices and rate income through ‘lifestyle’ attraction;
- Opportunity for higher density urban dwelling type (more public open space/less private open space) = affordable housing;
- Tourism attraction of scenic and horticultural settings; and
- Economic generator for photographic coffee-table publications, calendars and magazines.

The issues
- Whilst ever the above values remain largely unquantified and unappreciated, management bodies are unlikely to allocate sufficient funding towards the maintenance and expansion of Parkland. In summary:
  - The importance of Parkland to the health and wellbeing of communities/cities is not well understood.
  - The value and importance of Parkland to communities is not appreciated or respected by many decision-makers.
  - Parkland is seen as free land or empty unused space that can be given to another purpose.
The planning process currently does not prioritise parkland as a key element in a structure planning process resulting in low quality Parkland.

- Placing an economic return on Parkland investment remains difficult with benefits described as largely intangible outcomes, especially when in competition with other services more able to be quantified.
- Insufficient funding is allocated to ensure quality of Parkland is maintained.
- Parkland is not well protected by Government or statutory authorities.

- Currently there is no national guidance and associated rationale about the provision, distribution and/or density and carrying capacity of Parkland.
- Adequate provision of facilities and maintenance attention is necessary if Parkland is to offer attraction and encourage safe use in order that the community and individual health and well-being benefits are to be realised.
- User conflicts in Parkland are many especially along trail systems e.g. cycling and dog walking.
- Additionally other controversy arises regarding formal and informal temporary ‘exclusive’ use of Parkland (e.g. for weddings, club and family functions, professional trainer exercise sessions) about both such ‘exclusivity’ and payment for such usage.
- Car parking within Parkland can also be contentious in regard to both adequacy (to avoid street parking nearby) and parking fees.
- Parkland is often viewed as a consumable space for infrastructure development with little consideration to the implications of such decisions.
- Disposal by public authorities of surplus public land is a situation where there are divergent views. Public Authorities are generally required to obtain commercial value for such sites. Community members are generally of the view that public land should be available for the best public use at no further cost to the public. Ultimately, local Councils are frequently unable to afford such purchases for parkland at commercial rates and so critical opportunities to increase parkland in existing urban areas are often lost.

**Research**

Significant research on the health and wellbeing benefits of contact with nature has been undertaken internationally, especially over the last decade (see reference list at end). This important information needs to be consolidated, interpreted, summarised (and extended) and made more readily available to the profession.

Little formal visitation data exists to provide a persuasive ‘business case’ for increased expenditure on Parkland. Although participation in indoor and outdoor sport, as well as visits to leisure facilities such as swimming pools, zoos, libraries, galleries and museums are well recorded by relevant associations and nationally by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, visitation to outdoor spaces (by its very nature) is difficult to quantify.

**Parks & Leisure Australia’s Position**

Parks & Leisure Australia aims to progressively seek to promote these considerations to political and other decision-makers and to provide the parks and leisure industry with information to enable this to be done at a local level. A separate National Position Paper, Parkland - A Position Paper for political and other decision-makers exists for this purpose.
Parks & Leisure Australia has formed important partnerships with health sector bodies (eg ‘BeyondBlue’), and over recent years its annual conference has featured speakers from that sector in Australia and overseas, to communicate how the relationship between health and nature is being used to improve public investment in open space and especially Parkland.

1. Governments at all levels, and the broader community, have a responsibility to protect and enhance existing Parkland for current and future generations.
2. Quality Parkland should be planned as essential civic infrastructure in new settlement planning.
3. A diversity of Parkland suitable for various recreational uses needs to be convenient and accessible to all groups in the community.
4. There should be no net reduction in Parkland – indeed, in area of urban renewal and increasing density additional Parkland provision must be an essential component of urban planning with adequate funding allocation. A variety of approaches may be needed for planning Parkland in different settlement types as priorities may differ for inner urban areas, activity centres, growth areas and rural areas.
5. The value and importance of protecting areas for environmental benefit needs to be given a higher priority.
6. All levels of Government have a responsibility for ensuring that planning for Parkland takes place in a collaborative and coordinated manner, and that provision of Parkland is given the status it deserves given its importance to sustaining healthy communities.

In support of the above positions the following actions are recommended:

1. PLA will promote Parkland as being an essential component of urban “infrastructure”.
2. PLA will mount a national campaign to encourage individuals to visit Parkland as part of their well-being and PLAs commitment to improving community health.
3. PLA will advocate to local and state governments and other open space providers to improve the allocation of funding for the provision, protection and maintenance of Parkland.
4. PLA will encourage the ABS to include park visits and their purpose in future census or more specific relevant surveys.
5. PLA will produce fact sheets providing consolidated information on the (especially health and well-being) benefits of Parkland for application within the park industry.
6. PLA will progressively produce standards, benchmarks and guidelines to support the above positions.
7. PLA will identify associated research ‘gaps’ and work with academia and funding bodies to get them filled.
8. PLA will work with universities and TAFE institutes and to ensure the full appreciation and value of Parkland is included in curricula material.
References:
1. ‘Healthy parks healthy people – the health benefits of contact with nature’
   www.hppcentral.com/research/healthy-parks-healthy-people
2. “Open Space Planning and Design Guide”,

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