

Healthy Parks Healthy People: A Broad-based Partnership Program, Linking People with Parks for Better Health Outcomes and a Sustainable Future

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Background

Parks Victoria was established in 1996 through the merger of three agencies: namely, Melbourne Parks and Waterways (predominantly managing metropolitan parks, including reservoir parks), the National Parks Service (national parks, state parks, and wildlife reserves) and the non-commercial port functions of the disbanded Port of Melbourne Authority. The amalgamation provided a unique entity that was able to provide management services for parks, reserves, metropolitan rivers and bays, and other land under control of the state of Victoria, Australia.

Parks Victoria's comprehensive management services profile directly connects to the vast majority of the people of Victoria. With nearly 18% of the state under direct management, including responsibility for biodiversity protection, recreation services, cultural sites and wildfire response, we are able to approach issues in an integrated and comprehensive way. Given this scale and diversity of responsibility, there exists significant opportunity for innovation in the development of programs and delivery of services.

Our parks and visitor profile

Our park system is one of the most comprehensive and diverse in the world. We manage:

- **National parks.** These are generally large areas of nationally significant public land managed to protect their natural and cultural features and to provide for people's enjoyment, education, and inspiration. The largest in Victoria is Alpine National Park, at 645,615 hectares.
- **State parks.** Generally smaller and less nationally significant than national parks, state parks are areas of public land managed for the same purposes and under the same general guidelines. They complement the national parks to form a statewide system. State parks have an average area of 6,315 hectares.
- **Wilderness parks.** These are large areas managed for conservation and self-reliant recreation. No facilities are provided, nor are vehicles allowed.
- **Marine and coastal parks.** These are established to protect representative examples of marine and coastal environments.
- **Regional parks.** These include a variety of historical, cultural, and conservation reserves.
- **Conservation reserves.** Areas managed for conservation, generally with few or no facilities for visitors. They range from large areas in the Mallee savannah lands (e.g., 35,030 hectares) to small bush land areas of 1 hectare or less.

- **Metropolitan parks.** These parks are managed for intensive recreation and for conservation outcomes in and around metropolitan Melbourne.
- **Waterways.** The Yarra and the Maribyrnong rivers drain the catchment of greater Melbourne, emptying into Port Phillip, one of the largest embayments in the world. Parks Victoria is the recreational boating manager of those waterways, including built infrastructure (piers and jetties), non-commercial navigational aids, several small harbors, and boat launching facilities.

Our visitor profile reflects the diversity of opportunities for people to interact with parks across the state. Using sophisticated visitor survey techniques, we monitor visitor numbers, community perception of our management programs and activities, and our visitor satisfaction. Our survey data show that each year there are around 42.7 million visits to our parks and protected areas, and 30.8 million visits to piers and jetties around the bays and waterways. This figure has shown steady growth from 2001 and reflects keen interest in the many and varied places in the park network. Visitation is predominantly from the state of Victoria, with significant numbers from other Australian states and from overseas. This volume of people interacting with the parks and waterways provides us with a large opportunity to link our programs with other partners in the community and provide new ways to develop the role of parks in society.

Healthy Parks Healthy People

Like many natural resource management agencies around the world, Parks Victoria is challenged to respond to the breadth of issues that face society and to be relevant to communities and governments when there are so many other pressing issues facing us. Issues within areas such as education, health, security, transport, energy, and water, among others, can predominate when legislators are considering environment priorities. Increasingly, governments are seeking solutions within these areas that include partnerships between sectors, and which involve collaborations that produce better outcomes for society.

With this in mind, Parks Victoria reviewed its programs and found there were significant opportunities for collaboration across sectors, including the health sector. Beginning as a campaign to promote the benefits of a healthy environment to the community, Healthy Parks Healthy People has developed into a broad-based program supported by many of Australia's leading professional health organizations.

After commencing the first tentative promotional campaign to highlight the benefit of parks to society in 1998, Parks Victoria initiated a preliminary literature review with the Health & Behavioural Science Faculty of Deakin University in Melbourne. This review of the scientific and medical literature was so promising that we arranged for collaborative funding from a group of leading Australasian park organizations for a more comprehensive study and annotated bibliography to be produced.

The final report and bibliography are available and have created great interest with researchers and other bodies locally, nationally, and internationally. To access the report and associated bibliography, titled "The Health Benefits of Contact with Nature in a Park Context," go to www.parkweb.vic.gov.au/resources/mhphp/pv1.pdf. To keep up to date with

related research, go to www.deakin.edu.au/hbs/hsd/research/niche.

Our programs

Since the first promotional programs were developed based simply around the Healthy Parks Healthy People proposition, there has been a steady development of activities and support for the initiative. The key activities supported by Parks Victoria include:

- Our extensive volunteer program, in which we engage with a broad cross-section of the community in park and waterway management activities.
- Our partnership program, in which we seek to develop formal links with key stakeholders groups and supporters and develop complementary programs and activities.
- Our partnership with the peak medical and health bodies within the state of Victoria and nationally to develop complementary promotional campaigns and referral activities that support improved community health. This includes active support for new research that improves the knowledge available to policy-makers and health professionals.
- Our partnership with our employees, in which we provide opportunities to develop healthy lifestyles through provision of information and services that encourage better health outcomes.

Program activities: An example

The range of possibilities to develop activities under the Healthy Parks Healthy People program is very broad. The scope is really only limited by the imagination and the individual context in which the park agency operates. Parks Victoria has developed a range of signature activities relevant to our situation.

The World's Greatest Pram Stroll. This program was developed in close consultation with health and medical practitioners to respond to concerns over the mental and physical health of new mothers. There is significant evidence in the medical literature that new mothers can feel isolated and have reduced self-esteem following the birth of their baby. In some cases, there is a strong risk of mental illness leading to further problems. Getting mothers together and involved in social activities can be beneficial for the mother and for the new baby. Getting them together in a park and involving physical activity, thereby linking the health benefits on offer, was the objective of the first World's Greatest Pram Stroll.

Held in Albert Park, one of Melbourne's most popular metropolitan parks, the first event was supported by leading groups in the health sector and attracted hundreds of mothers with their new babies for a walk in the park. Some six years on, the event has grown in size and spread to over 26 locations across the country. The 2007 event attracted several thousand mothers and families and was widely featured in the media. On-going benefits include social support groups for new mothers, health professionals supporting the concept and continuing to refer patients, and a whole new group of people actively involved in the parks and enjoying the benefits that they provide. Moreover, parks were seen to provide benefits well beyond those previously envisaged by the community.

This and similar activities developed under our programs have worked to develop knowledge and awareness of the role that our parks and waterways play in society, in addi-

tion to the significant natural ecological and physical benefits that they bring. By working with key policy institutions, health providers, and community groups, we have developed a significantly wider network of people who appreciate and support the role that parks play in our society. At a time when there is increasing pressure on the availability of resources for services to the community, the health sector has become a confident supporter of the benefits that our parks and waterways bring to a modern society.

While there will always be temporal issues over individual priorities in the government service sector, we are confident that our relevance to the community has been broadened and our resourcing has improved year on year especially in the provision of services that support improved and more equitable access to parks. At the same time, awareness of all our parks, including support for even the most remote and inaccessible areas, is strong.

The future

Principal researcher at the Deakin University, Mardie Townsend, is continuing to progress the initiatives started in 1998. The school is collaborating with municipal governments in the east and north of Melbourne on a study to examine the benefits of community involvement in civic and environment programs. She is also collaborating with researchers in the U.K. and U.S. (e.g., Professor Howard Frumkin, Emory University, Atlanta).

On a more specific front, another study covering municipalities in the north and east of Melbourne is examining the health and well-being benefits of volunteering in environmental management programs.

One regional health authority, Barwon Health, has developed an initiative linking people suffering depression with opportunities to work with environment practitioners in rehabilitation treatments that respond to severe depression (and possible suicide risk).

A consortium comprising the city of Melbourne, Parks Victoria, Centennial Park Authority, Sydney Olympic Park Authority, and Deakin University is studying people's response to high-density multi-story living and their interactions with parks. Surveys have been completed, and a draft report prepared with the final report expected soon.

International interest is growing following presentation of related papers at the World Parks Congress in Durban in 2003 (see www.interenvironment.org/pa/papers2.htm) and at the World Parks Leadership Forum in La Paz, Mexico, in 2006. More recently, the convener of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas urban task force and president of the California Institute of Public Affairs, Ted Tryzna, hosted a meeting in Sacramento, California, at which this author presented on the practical and strategic elements of the Healthy Parks Healthy People program. Based on attendance at the forum and subsequent follow-up, there is significant interest from the state of California in adopting the program.

Further development of the program here in Victoria will occur in coming years as more states in Australia and overseas institutions develop their own Healthy Parks Healthy People initiatives. Our long-term objective is to continue to work with the health and medical community and with the research community to broaden the range of programs and to build awareness in Australia that parks are a vital part of a healthy and sustainable future.