



state of **AUSTRALIAN CITIES**

national conference >03

Carlton Hotel, Parramatta

3-5 December 2003

Parks in the city

Authored by:

A. J. Veal
Sarah Dinning

University of Technology, Sydney
Sydney Urban Parks Education and Research Group

tony.veal@uts.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Recent research by the Sydney Urban Parks Education and Research (SUPER) Group, a consortium of Sydney park agencies, indicates the significance of urban parks in contemporary urban life in Australia. This paper presents data from the second of two community surveys of park use conducted for SUPER Group in 1998 and 2001, which show how urban parks in Sydney successfully cater for demand from all sections of the community. Unlike many publicly provided leisure facilities, which often cater for a minority of the population and for particular demographic or socio-economic groups, it is difficult to identify any group which is *not* served by urban parks. Among the population aged 16 and over it was found that 91% had visited at least one park in the previous year. Further, it was found that this figure varied very little across a wide range of social groups, defined by age, gender, ethnicity, economic status and class. The paper considers the range of benefits of park provision and use that accrue to the community and ways that they might be evaluated. In particular consideration is given to assessment of the health benefits of parks which form the basis of the current 'Healthy Parks, Healthy People' campaign.

INTRODUCTION

Urban parks are one of the most pervasive of public leisure facilities and account for a substantial proportion of public sector provision for, and expenditure on, leisure services. ABS data indicates that there were 52,256 urban parks in Australia in 1996-97, covering 3.3 million hectares and costing approximately \$1 billion a year to maintain. Extrapolating Sydney-based data, it is estimated that these parks attract an estimated 13 million visits per week or almost 700 million a year.

This paper draws on the work of the Sydney Urban Parks Education and Research (SUPER) Group, which is a consortium of NSW state parks agencies¹ which conducts research and education programs of common interest. In an era of increasing demands for accountability and high levels of customer service, the agencies see a need for high quality information on the social, economic, environmental and aesthetic value of parks and gardens to the community. Since 1998, SUPER Group has conducted a number of projects, including: a qualitative study of park visit motives; two Sydney-wide social surveys of park visitation; and a

study of the value of parks to other state agencies. In 2004 there are plans to repeat the Sydney-wide survey.

The paper concentrates on the results of the 2001 telephone survey of 1500 people aged 16 and over living in the metropolitan area of Sydney, which was conducted by Environmetrics in November 2001.

PARK VISITATION

The survey concentrated on visits to the major parks represented by SUPER Group agencies, but also gathered information on visits to local parks and other leisure attractions. As Figure 1 shows, 91% of respondents had visited at least one park in the last 12 months and 55% had done so within the last week. Although a systematic international comparison has not been undertaken, British data from the early 1990s indicate only 70% visiting a park in the course of a year (Comedia, 1995: 9). The Sydney park visit rate is significantly higher than that for other publicly provided or commercially provided out-of-home leisure facilities. Figure 2 presents visit rates for a range of other activities/facilities/venues for comparison. The figure for sport and physical activities covers a wide range of types of activity and venue and may involve some overlap with park attendance.

Who doesn't visit parks?

Parks are a public resource intended for the use of everyone. With a 91% visit rate, it would appear that parks are achieving that objective overall. However, averages often hide inequalities, so an effort has been made to discover whether any particular groups are *not* making use of parks. In the diagrams referred to below, visitation in the last week, month, three months, six months and a year are indicated, with the white segments indicating those who have *not* visited a park in the last year.

- *Gender*: Figure 1 indicates that the proportion of women visiting parks is about 2% less than men.
- *Age*: Figure 3 shows a not unexpected decline in the visit rate by people in their mid-50s to mid-60s, with a 'bounce back' in the retirement years.
- *Country of birth*: Figure 4 shows that, overall, there is no difference in park

visiting between Australian-born and overseas-born residents, but Figure 5 shows some variation among groups born in particular regions, with the SE Asia-born residents' visit rate being some 10% below the average, although still at 80%.

- *Education:* Figure 6 indicates little variation by education level, with the exception of those whose highest level of education was primary school, a group made up mainly of the elderly who did not received secondary education.
- *Economic status/occupation:* Figure 7 again indicates little variation across occupational groups, with the exception of home-makers, which includes mostly women, reflecting the findings in relation to gender, above.
- *Region:* Figure 8 shows a lower than average visit rate by Gosford/Wyong residents - the reason for this has not yet been investigated.

Overall, it is not possible to find any social group with a visit level more than 10% below the average. This 'reach' suggests that urban parks already play a unique role in the community, but with the potential to offer even more.

THE VALUE OF URBAN PARKS

This part of the research is in its early stages; the discussion below is therefore exploratory only.

The value of urban parks lies in their direct contribution to individual enjoyment and well-being and in indirect collective contributions to the community, the economy and the environment, as indicated in Figure 9. Because entry to urban parks is generally free to the visitor, even the benefits enjoyed by individuals must be seen as 'social' - that is parks are a form of 'collective consumption' in which governments - state or local - must act on behalf of individuals to secure the service (Castells, 1977). The question therefore arises as to whether governments have secured appropriate amounts of the service to optimise citizen satisfaction and collective social benefits. In particular, in economic terms, what is the relationship between the costs and benefits of providing urban park services?

SUPER group has not yet addressed all of the elements in Figure 9. The highlighted items only are discussed below.

Recreational - Direct

- *Visitor enjoyment*

Making the conservative assumption that the 55% of the population who visit parks in a given week do so on average 1.3 times² in the week, and assuming that children aged under 16 visit parks at the same rate as those aged 16 and over, then the number of visits by Sydney residents to urban parks is 2.9 million a week, or 149 million a year.

The number of visits is a valid indicator of benefits in its own right, but it is possible, using one or more of a number of well-established methods, to convert this to a dollar value. However, such techniques have not been widely applied to the urban park context. An exception is the study by Garrod et al. (1993) of British botanic gardens, which, allowing for inflation since 1993, suggests an individual valuation of up to \$3 per park visit, giving a total estimated value of almost \$450 million a year for Sydney residents' urban parks visits.

- *Visitor health/wellbeing*

The value of parks in providing health/wellbeing lies in enhanced physical health arising from exercise and enhanced mental health from the opportunity for contemplation, relaxation and 'getting away from it all'.

As regards physical exercise, while the most commonly reported activity in parks is 'walking' (48%), it is not known how vigorous the walking of the typical park user is, and therefore what health benefits this produces. Only a minority (about 25%) of park visitors do so to engage in specific physical recreation/sporting activities.

The idea of parks being valuable for mental health and wellbeing is reflected in the survey responses of park users: 58% valued parks as a 'place to relax' and 60% as a place to 'appreciate the beauty of nature', compared with just 43% as a place to 'get some exercise'. Among the top items 'enjoyed most' about visiting a park were: 'Quietness/away from hustle and bustle' (18%); 'Trees and greenery' (18%); 'Scenery/views' (14%) and 'Being able to relax' (12%)

In 2002 Parks Victoria commissioned research on the health aspects of park use (Maller et al., 2002a, 2002b) and launched the campaign Healthy Parks Healthy People. This theme is also being adopted by SUPER Group member agencies and it is envisaged that, in addition to marketing the concept 'Healthy Parks Healthy People', specific projects will be launched to encourage more people to use parks in a way which will enhance their health and to monitor the effects.

The question of valuing these benefits in terms of savings in health costs is discussed below.

Recreational - Indirect/community

- *Health cost savings*

In a 1988 study conducted for the then Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories, Roberts and Thompson (1988) estimated that the net benefits (in terms of health and absenteeism costs saved, and productivity increased) from achieving a 10% increase in participation in physical activity among the Australian population would be \$590 million per annum, or \$295 per person (\$425 at today's prices). It is not clear how much of the exercise which people engage in parks would take place anyway, even if parks were not available. There is also uncertainty, as discussed above, about how much 'walking' in parks produces positive physical health benefits. Further, the health benefits accrue only if the exercise is taken regularly. Valuing mental health/wellbeing is an even more difficult proposition.

Taking account of all these factors, if it is assumed that a quarter of park visits produce the sorts of health benefits referred to, then the 2.2 million Sydney residents who visit parks in a week produce some \$233.7 million of health cost savings a year.

- *Community cohesion*

Loss of community and social capital is a concern of many contemporary industrial societies. The idea was highlighted in the USA in Robert Putnam's (2000) book *Bowling Alone* and in Australia by discussion of the concept of 'civil society' and 'social capital' (Cox, 1995). The idea of parks as *social* places was discussed 40 years ago by Jane Jacobs (1961) in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Indeed, the origins of parks in nineteenth century industrial cities were as places

where people could promenade and socialise in safety (Cocks, 2001). While some forms of community interaction, such as in clubs and associations, are intense and personal, others are fleeting and anonymous, but nevertheless important to 'civil society' (Comedia, 1995: 25). Public space devoted to leisure offers a different sort of experience from that devoted to commerce and transport but one which is, arguably, just as vital to the life of the city. Parks are places where 'civil society' can be seen to be in operation. In addition to 'rest/relaxation/escape', as discussed above, SUPER group survey respondents identified 'A place to spend time with other people' (49%) and 'A place for community gatherings' (35%) as important values of parks.

Of course poorly designed, neglected, or poorly managed parks can do quite the opposite: indeed a number of the overseas research and commentary on parks referred to above is concerned with rescuing parks from decline and recovering their full potential (Jacobs, 1961: Comedia, 1995). So far, SUPER Group research has identified very little negative reaction to parks, but overseas experience remains as an indication of the possible effects of neglect.

Environmental/Aesthetic - Indirect/community

- *Education*

One of SUPER Group's projects addressed *The Value of Public Open Space for Community Service Provision*. It covered the use of urban parks by other state agencies, and thus its scope was wider than education, but the bulk of the usage identified was by schools. It was estimated that, for the Sydney metropolitan area, the cost of locating alternative locations for school and TAFE sport programs would be \$4.25 million per annum and the cost of relocating school environmental programs would be \$3.55 million per annum. The value of parks - and particularly botanic gardens - as locations for environmental education of the general public has not been investigated, but the survey evidence suggests that such motivations are not prominent among users, at least consciously.

CONCLUSION

SUPER Group research has identified urban parks as the most popular public leisure facility. Insofar as benefits of parks can be valued economically, limited research to date suggests that Sydney's parks may produce annual user-satisfaction, health and

education benefits worth in the order of \$700 million. Research on the potential values and benefits of urban parks suggests that the high current level of usage of parks provides a platform for substantial enhancements to their roles as promoters of health and civil society in the city.

REFERENCES

- Castells, M. (1977) *The Urban Question*. Edward Arnold, London.
- Cocks, C. (2001) *Doing the Town: the Rise of Urban Tourism in the United States, 1859-1915*. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press.
- Comedia (1995) *Park Life: Urban Parks and Social Renewal*. London, Comedia in association with Demos.
- Cox, E. (1995) *A Truly Civil Society: The 1995 Boyer Lectures*. Sydney, ABC Books.
- Garrod, G., Pickering, A. and Willis, K. (1993) The economic value of botanic gardens: a recreational perspective. *Geoforum*, 24(2), 215-22.
- Jacobs, J. (1961) The uses of neighborhood parks. Ch. 6 of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York, Vintage Books, pp. 112-142
- Maller, C., Townsend, M., Brown, P., and St. Leger, L. (2002a) *Healthy Parks Healthy People: The Benefits of Contact with Nature in a Park Context: An Annotated Bibliography*. Report to Parks Victoria and International Park Strategic Partners Group, Melbourne, Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences, Deakin University.
- Maller, C., Townsend, M., Brown, P., and St. Leger, L. (2002b) *Healthy Parks Healthy People: The Benefits of Contact with Nature in a Park Context: A Review of Current Literature*. Report to Parks Victoria and International Park Strategic Partners Group, Melbourne, Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences, Deakin University.
- Manidis Robert and A. J. Veal (2003) *Centennial Parklands: Validation of Visit Estimates*. Report to the Centennial Park and Moore Park Trust, Sydney.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and revival of American Community*. New York, Simon and Schuster.
- Roberts, A. and Thompson, P. (1988) *The Economic Impact of Sport and Recreation - Regular Physical Activity*. Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment, Tourism and Territories Technical Paper No. 2, AGPS, Canberra.
- Sydney Urban Parks Education and Research (SUPER) Group (2002) *The Value of Public Open Space for Community Service Provision*. Report by Hassall and Associates to: SUPER Group, Sydney (Summary in *Australasian Parks and Leisure*, 5(3), 2002, pp. 11-13).

Figure 1. Sydney residents visiting at least one park, by gender, 2001

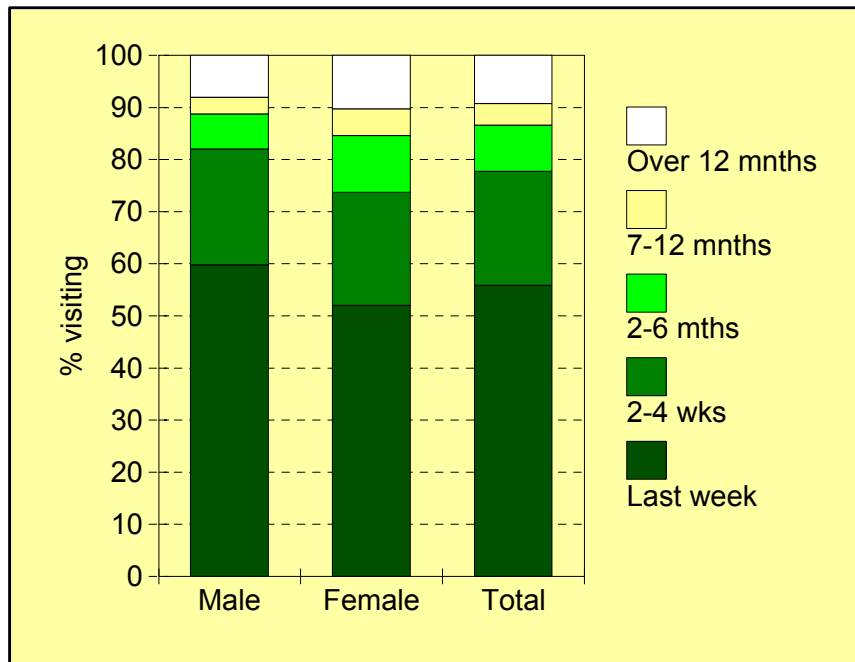


Figure 2. Visiting selected leisure venues, Australia, 2000

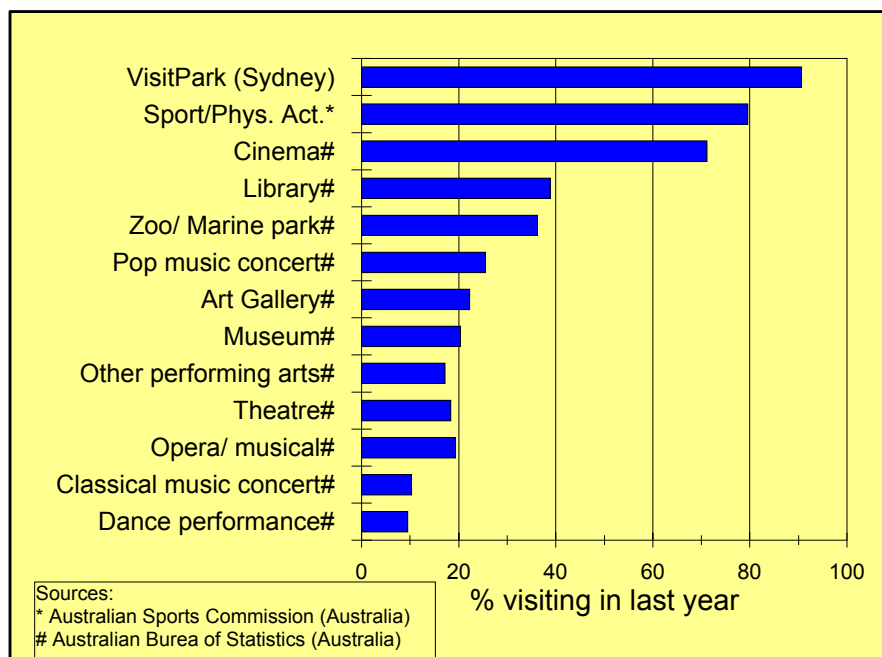


Figure 3. Sydney residents visiting at least one park, by age, 2001

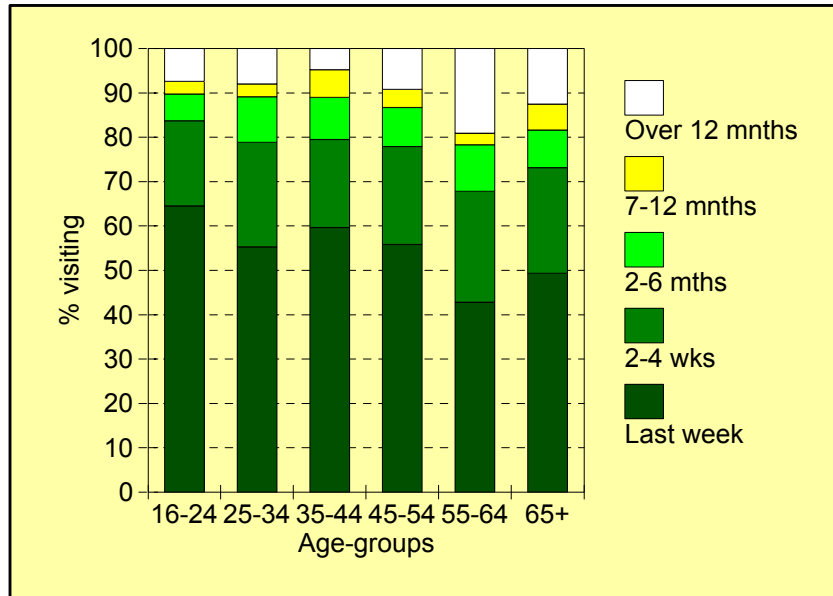


Figure 4. Sydney residents visiting at least one park, by Australia/overseas born, 2001

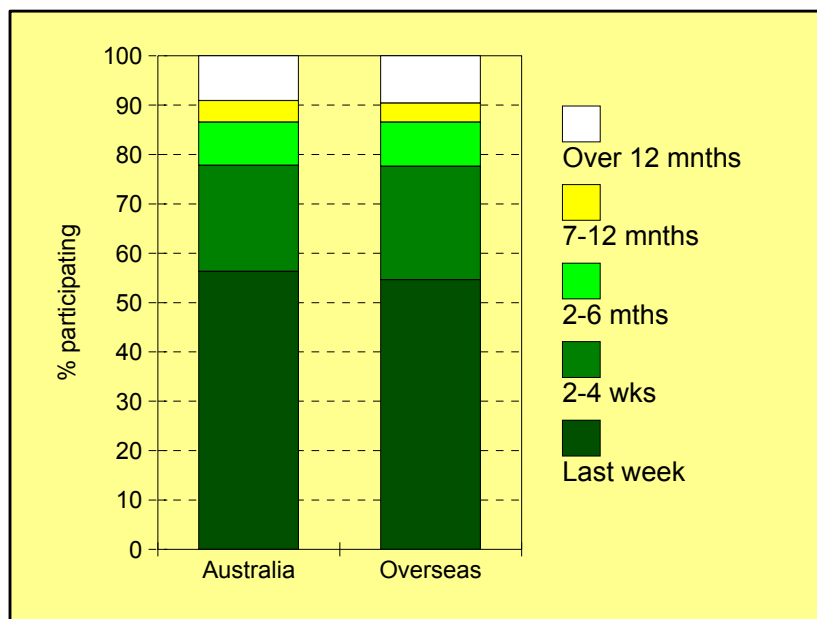


Figure 5. Sydney residents visiting at least one park, by Country of birth, 2001

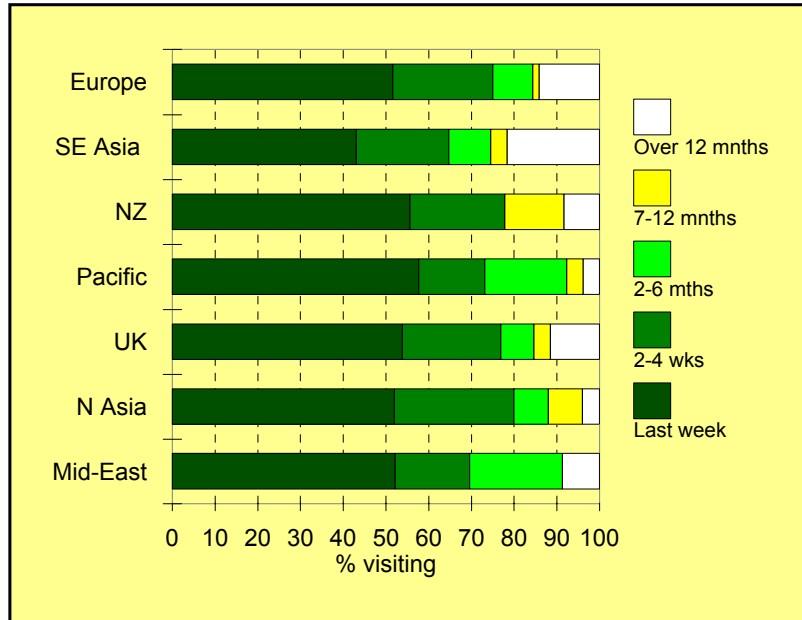


Figure 6. Sydney residents visiting at least one park, by level of education, 2001

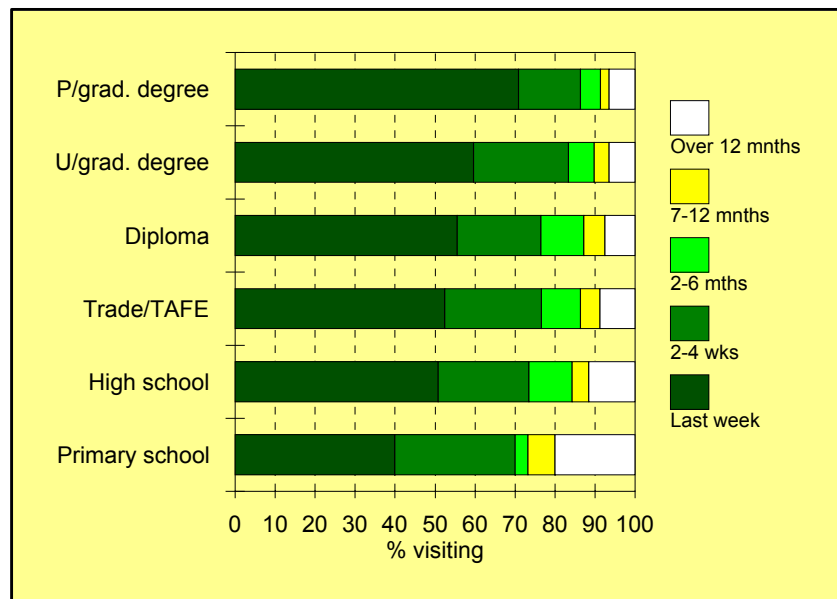


Figure 7. Sydney residents visiting at least one park, by economic status, 2001

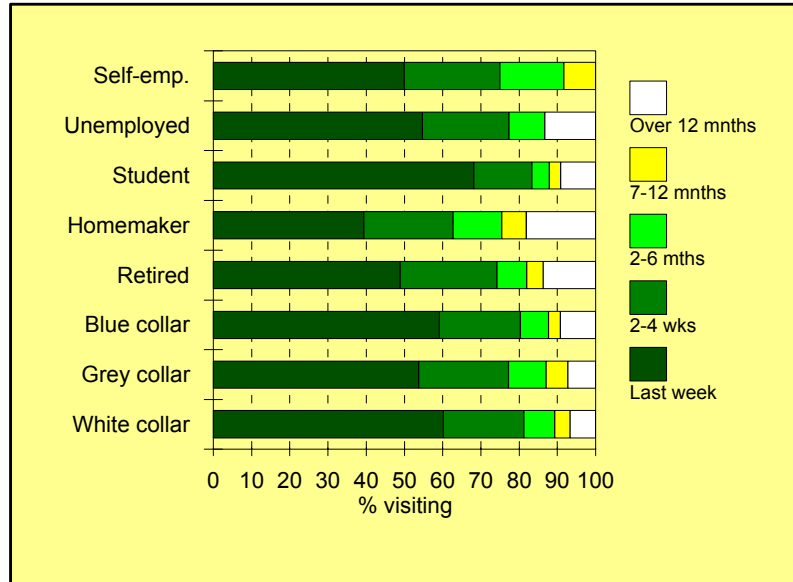


Figure 8. Sydney residents visiting at least one park, by region, 2001

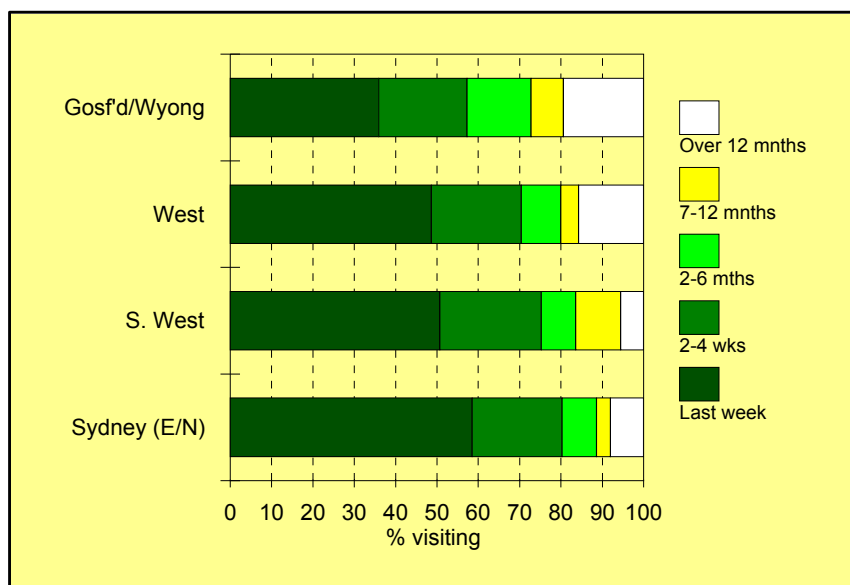


Figure 9. Benefits of urban parks

	Direct	INDIRECT/COMMUNITY
Recreational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visitor enjoyment • Visitor health/wellbeing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health cost savings • Crime reduction • Option value to non-visitors • Community cohesion
Environmental/ Aesthetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local real-estate beneficiaries • Passers-by 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced real estate tax • Dispersal of pollution etc. • Attraction of business/tourists • Education • Wildlife/nature/heritage conservation

¹ Centennial Park and Moore Park Trust; Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust; NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service (Regional Parks Unit); Parramatta Park Trust; Sydney Olympic Park Authority; Sydney Harbour Federation Trust; Dept. of Infrastructure and Natural Resource Planning; lands (OCA) and University of Technology, Sydney. Further details can be found at the SUPER Group web-site: www.cp.nsw.gov.au/projects/supergroup. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of SUPER Group member organisations.

² Studies in Centennial Park suggest that the people who visit the park in a given week do so on average about 1.7 times (Manidis Roberts and Veal, 2003).

STATE OF AUSTRALIAN CITIES NATIONAL CONFERENCE

SYDNEY, 2003

SPONSORS

University of Western Sydney
Australian National University
The University of New South Wales
Griffith University
The University of Melbourne
Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment
NSW Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources
ACT Planning and Land Authority

▶▶▶ For all enquiries, please contact:-

University of Western Sydney
Urban Frontiers Program
Building 22, Campbelltown Campus
Locked Bag 1797, Penrith South DC NSW 1797

Phone +61 2 4620 3443

Fax +61 2 4620 3447

Email urbanfrontiers@uws.edu.au

Web www.urbanfrontiers.uws.edu.au