

## Submission to the Environment and Planning References Committee into the contribution of environmental design to prevention and public health in Victoria

Parks Forum as the industry association for park management agencies in Australia and New Zealand supports the initiative to investigate the role of natural and built environments to promote individual and societal health and well being. Our membership includes all of Australia's State and Territory protected area agencies, as well many urban park agencies. We are committed to supporting Australia and New Zealand's park management agencies to carry out their important stewardship task of sustaining healthy parks systems, and therefore healthy communities.

There are many national and international documents that recognise the diverse values of parks and the community benefits derived from parks, some of these include *The Value of Parks* publication<sup>i</sup>, the National Landscapes project, the Healthy Parks Healthy People Congress proceedings<sup>ii</sup> and IUCN/UNESCO documents and programs.

We are pleased to be able to participate in this important inquiry into environmental design and public health and believe that our submission will support others, such as that of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, who have articulated the role of parks and open spaces in building mental, physical and social health. In particular we will focus on the following areas identified in the inquiry;

- (1) review the evidence of the contribution of the natural and built environments to the promotion of health and well being;
- (2) identify and report on those elements of environmental planning and design which provide the most promising opportunities; and
- (5) provide recommendations for future planning and investment.

### (1) Review the evidence of the contribution of the natural and built environments to the promotion of health and well being;

*"A healthy parks system is a vital component of a healthy community."<sup>iii</sup>*

Contact with nature contributes to the psychological, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of citizens and visitors. Parks are places of adventure and challenge, exercise, peace and quiet, recreation, gathering and relaxation. They contribute to our sense of enjoyment, community spirit and wonder in nature.

Parks provide us with a huge variety of spaces to exercise and to build physical fitness and wellbeing. These range from trackless wilderness or mountain peaks to quiet relaxing green corners in our local neighbourhoods. Protected areas allow us to pursue a range of healthy and vigorous outdoor activities like hiking, cycling, canoeing and mountaineering.

Recent Australian research<sup>iv</sup> has found that natural environments offer low-cost preventative and remedial opportunities for public health. They are pleasant and accessible settings to combat the effects of our increasingly sedentary lifestyles such as obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure and depression.

Preventative steps to increase good health are now understood to be a crucial part of our strategy to control healthcare costs, and governments around the world are investing in this area to promote healthier lifestyles.

Surveys indicate that in NSW today, one in five people will experience depression, and that over 6 million working days are lost each year across Australia as a result. Further research indicates that regular exercise in green spaces is beneficial for people suffering from mental illness. Postnatal depression is the most prevalent mood disorder associated with childbirth and affects up to 15% of childbearing women<sup>v</sup>. Contact with nature in parks can make a difference.

Parks provide settings where families and friends come together to have fun, celebrate important occasions or just to relax and take time out. This has immense social value and is part of the 'glue' of a healthy society.

Across NSW, thousands of people get involved in parks volunteering and Friends of Parks groups. They meet regularly to socialise and contribute to improving the way that parks are managed. In Victoria and the UK, the Green Gym<sup>vi, vii</sup> program has been established to increase the levels of physical activity and build respect for the environment through volunteering for programs on public land. In the UK, Green Gym is supported by the Department of Health to make exercise and improved fitness accessible to individuals who would not usually visit a traditional gym.

A recent survey of 26 parks agencies recorded over 600, 000 volunteer hours across Australia and New Zealand<sup>viii</sup>. Volunteering engenders community spirit and provides many health and social benefits to those involved.

## (2) identify and report on those elements of environmental planning and design which provide the most promising opportunities;

People's use of parks is diverse and their experiential wants and needs vary with their age, ability and demographic so a range of designs and plans to promote physical and mental health are required. In urban areas most park visitors want their parks to be welcoming, to provide a safe and secure environment and to provide easy access for people of all abilities.

The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects has developed a range of broad principles<sup>ix</sup> for landscape design which can be equally applied to parks and open spaces. Similarly, Blueprint for an Active Australia<sup>x</sup> clearly identifies actions to increase physical activity; many of which can be achieved through better links in policy and planning departments charged with responsibility for natural and built environments of urban and peri-urban areas. The Spaceshaper toolkit is an internationally recognised program for measuring the quality of public space and to aid decision making about future planning and use<sup>xi</sup>.

*"I like to play indoors better 'cause' that's where all the electrical outlets are". – A fourth-grader in San Diego<sup>xii</sup>*

Reconnecting children with the natural world and outdoor activity has recently become a major international focus<sup>ix</sup>. Richard Louv, acclaimed author of *Last Child in the Woods*, advocates the No Child Left Inside program which has been introduced by local authorities in the US. Importantly, this global movement recognises the mental health, cognitive development and social awareness benefits of natural play; it goes beyond the physical health benefits gained from organised sport.

This area of design and planning provides many opportunities to reinvigorate both old and new urban parks with living landscapes<sup>xiii, xiv</sup>. A significant part of the focus of outdoor activity is providing unstructured play for young children and engaging teenagers in nature based activities.

In Australia there are many examples of good design and promotion of play in nature. They include the Ian Potter Foundation Children's Garden at the Royal Botanic Garden in Melbourne<sup>xv</sup>; the Nature Play WA<sup>xvi</sup> program and new Naturescape environment at Kings Park and Botanic Garden, in Perth.

(5) provide recommendations for future planning and investment;

The benefits of preventative health measures are becoming more widely recognised, with many Australian states now working to improve links between government and community agencies to strengthen physical activity programs for healthy lifestyles, for supporting the environment and to build stronger communities<sup>xvii</sup>.

Australia is one of the most urbanised communities on earth and, Melbourne is undergoing significant and sustained growth, both in terms of population density throughout the city, as well as at the urban fringe. Critical to the long-term sustainability of these growing communities, is the protection and enhancement of the green infrastructure within them. Degradation of existing green infrastructure or insufficient provision of open space in communities at the urban fringe will have significant long term impacts on health and liveability.

This submission has touched on only a few aspects of the value of parks to society and their role in physical and mental health and, wellbeing. Around the world there is growing and strong evidence of the benefits of parks to environmental, social, physical and economic health. It is vital that investment in parks and their management and promotion is increased.

Financial and/or human resource investments are required to;

- Provide new opportunities for children and youth to reconnect with nature for mental and physical well being and to combat our increasingly sedentary lifestyle
- Build on the growing links between health, transport, planning and park/environment agencies together with State and local governments to ensure that a holistic approach is applied to environmental planning and design for the promotion of health and well being
- Develop a “Green Infrastructure” policy to recognise the critical importance of parks and green space to the health of communities, setting new standards and goals for green infrastructure and; seeking more consistency in mechanisms to protect and enhance it, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas
- Ensure that parks are sustained in a healthy condition for current and future generations to adequately support diverse uses, from passive through to active recreation or for social purposes.

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## References

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- <sup>ii</sup> Healthy Parks Healthy people Congress 2010 <http://www.healthyparkshealthypeoplecongress.org/>
- <sup>iii</sup> Parks Victoria, Healthy People, Healthy Parks brochure  
[http://www.parkweb.vic.gov.au/resources/04\\_0154.pdf](http://www.parkweb.vic.gov.au/resources/04_0154.pdf)
- <sup>iv</sup> Maller, C., Townsend, M., O'Brien, P. and St Leger, L. (2002). *Healthy Parks Healthy People: The health benefits of contact with nature in a park context: A review of current literature*.  
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- <sup>v</sup> Beyond Blue: the national depression initiative: [http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link\\_id=94.606](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?link_id=94.606)
- <sup>vi</sup> Conservation Volunteers <http://www.conservationvolunteers.com.au/greengym.htm>
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- <sup>viii</sup> Tonge, J. and Moore, S.A. (2011). Draft Great Parks Network Benchmark Survey 2010. Parks Forum, Fitzroy.
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<http://www.aila.org.au/charter/docs/AILA-Charter2011.pdf>
- <sup>x</sup> National Heart Foundation of Australia. Blueprint for an active Australia. 2009.
- <sup>xi</sup> Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment  
<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110118095356/http://www.cabe.org.uk/public-space/spaceshaper> The National Archives, UK.
- <sup>xii</sup> Louv, R. Last Child in the Woods. Saving Children from Nature – Deficit Disorder. McPherson's Printing Group, Australia.
- <sup>xiii</sup> London Play <http://www.londonplay.org.uk/>
- <sup>xiv</sup> Kidsafe Western Australia <http://www.kidsafewa.com.au/naturalplay.html>
- <sup>xv</sup> Melbourne Gardens – Royal Botanic Garden Melbourne  
<http://www.rbg.vic.gov.au/rbg-melbourne/childrens-garden>
- <sup>xvi</sup> Nature Play WA <http://www.natureplaywa.org.au/activities>
- <sup>xvii</sup> Physical Activity Taskforce <http://www.beactive.wa.gov.au/>