

A Global and Local Perspective Healthy Parks Healthy People

Text by Ling Han and Kathryn Campbell
Images by Parks Victoria

Introduction

The world-class system of parks in Victoria, which have long been cherished as places to escape to, enjoy, discover, learn, and be inspired, is central to its liveability. Since 1996, Australia's Parks Victoria has managed over four million hectares of parks, alongside its partners, as well as with the help of many volunteers and the broader Victorian community. Acknowledging the integral link between natural environments and human health, Parks Victoria has developed into an institution that is respected around the world for its pioneering approach to park management referred to as "Healthy Parks Healthy People" and its enthusiasm for building partnerships for the betterment of the environment and communities.

Striving to build a global coalition for promoting the value of parks for human health and well-being, Parks Victoria has established long-term partnerships at the local, state, national, and international levels. In early 2000, Parks Victoria and Singapore's National Parks Board signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for a staff exchange programme as a consequence of the growing mutual interest in culture and park management. The programme has since seen the exchange of two staff members from National Parks Board and one from Parks Victoria. The MOU was further updated in 2012 and a placement is currently underway for National Parks Board to be involved and gather first-hand experience on the central role of Healthy Parks Healthy People in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Parks Congress (WPC) 2014 as well as in the "Working beyond the Boundaries" community engagement programme at Werribee Park in Victoria. National Parks Board will also work with Parks Victoria to showcase Singapore's initiatives in optimising urban spaces for greenery and recreation, creating supportive park programmes and environments to engage different user groups,

as well as restoring biodiversity to urban parks during the congress.

International Union for Conservation of Nature World Parks Congress 2014

The IUCN WPC 2014 is a landmark forum on protected areas held once every 10 years. Since its official launch in Seattle, USA, in 1962, it has provided a unique global platform for the gathering of world leaders and individuals involved in the planning, governance, and management of protected areas to set the conservation agenda for the decades ahead. WPC 2014 will be held in Sydney, Australia, from 12 to 19 November 2014 with the theme of "Parks, People, Planet: Inspiring Solutions". With an expected turnout of over 3,000 delegates from 160 countries, the congress promises to be far-reaching in impact. The previous WPC, held in Durban, South Africa, in September 2003 was patronised by the late Nelson Mandela, the former South African President and Nobel Peace Prize winner, as well as Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan. This WPC delivered a number of key outcomes with profound changes in the way nature conservation is conducted. They include: the Durban Accord and Action Plan, a set of 32 Congress Recommendations; a series of initiatives for protected areas in Africa; and a formal Message to the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. There is no better avenue for increasing the understanding of the vital role that the environment plays in delivering ecosystem services and underpinning human health, well-being and livelihoods.

Parks Victoria has partnered with the US National Parks Service to lead the "Improving Health and Well-being: Healthy Parks Healthy People" stream at the IUCN WPC. This is one of the eight streams that

make up the overall Congress programme. Having successfully organised the Inaugural International Healthy Parks Healthy People Congress 2010 in Melbourne, Parks Victoria has generated significant international interest in the Healthy Parks Healthy People programme from a global audience of park managers, research organisations, policymakers, leaders, and the community. The Melbourne Communiqué, a key outcome of the International Healthy Parks Healthy People Congress 2010, called on leading government agencies and organisations around the world to further our understanding of and strengthen the connection between nature and people (Healthy Parks Healthy People International Congress 2010). It was a perfect lead-up to the development of the Improving Health and Well-being: Healthy Parks Healthy People stream at the IUCN WPC.

The underlying principles of the Healthy Parks Healthy People approach are almost unbelievably simple. They are described by Parks Victoria as follows:

- The well-being of all societies depends on healthy ecosystems
- Parks nurture healthy ecosystems
- Contact with nature is essential for improving emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being
- Parks are fundamental to economic growth and to vibrant and healthy communities

These principles are increasingly supported by growing scientific evidence and are best illustrated in *The Health Benefits of Contact with Nature*, an independent review of international research by academics at Deakin University, Melbourne, published in 2002 and updated in 2008. The research found over 200 studies showing significant human health benefits from contact with nature. Other notable findings include: First, walking in the forest reduces stress hormones, improves immune function, and raises the number of NK (or



1. Activities to connect children with nature at Plenty Gorge Park.

cancer-fighting) cells (Li 2010; Li and Kawada 2011). Second, positive correlations have been found between interaction with natural environments and human spiritual and mental well-being, characterised by improvements in mood, a sense of belonging, and self-esteem (Keniger et al. 2013). Last but not least, green landscapes and interior plants were shown to provide tangible socioeconomic benefits by raising work productivity, encouraging community interaction, and reducing potential healthcare costs (Irvine et al. 2010).

On the other hand, scientific results are painting a picture of dire circumstances for the human and natural environment. To name a few, global temperatures are projected to rise up to 5.8 degrees Celsius by 2100 if the world continues to undergo deforestation and burn fossil fuels at the current rate (IPCC 2013, 1535). Global biodiversity is declining rapidly with human activity increasing the extinction rate by at least 100 times compared to the natural rate (CBD 2010, 94). The prevalence of obesity among children and modern health risks owing to physical inactivity

have reached globally epidemic proportions (WHO 2009, 55). In addition, depression is fast becoming the leading cause of healthy years lost owing to disability (WHO 2009, 55). As more people become aware of the challenging future the modern world is facing, the principles of Healthy Parks Healthy People become apparent and easy to understand. However, deriving practical solutions to today's conservation and development issues will prove to be much more challenging. For a start, it will take more than mere individual understanding of the matters at hand.

The Improving Health and Well-being: Healthy Parks Healthy People stream at the IUCN WPC is designed to grow the international movement aimed at bringing people closer to nature and its diverse health benefits via a selection of proposed content from individuals and organisations across the world. A common understanding between park managers, health professionals, and diverse sectors both in and outside of conservation is crucial to building lasting partnerships to tackle the complex, cross-boundary issues

that our planet and populations face. The stream will also encourage the exchange of ideas and knowledge, particularly new concepts of healthy parks in various contexts, including medicine, disease regulation, traditional health knowledge, livelihood support, and settings for improving physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. For instance, can we further quantify the positive effects of nature as a fundamental health resource in terms of disease prevention? With this new perspective, protecting natural landscapes can be seen as a powerful form of preventive medicine.

The delivery of the stream programme will also activate a cascade of initiatives to push the boundaries of parks on health and well-being. An array of capacity development workshops and post-congress technical field trips to Victoria have been planned, along with the launch of the third edition of *The Health Benefits of Contact with Nature*. Meanwhile, Parks Victoria has reactivated the website www.hphpcentral.com—a one-stop online resource for practitioners and field researchers in park and health sectors to gain insights on the latest innovations, articles, events, and opportunities to connect with experts on people, health, and nature. Last, and perhaps most symbolically, IUCN has commissioned a worldwide taskforce to begin work on the *Healthy Parks Healthy People Best Practice Guidelines*, which is slated to be unveiled during the 2nd International Healthy Parks Healthy People Congress and Expo in Atlanta, USA, in July 2015.

It is envisioned that WPC 2014 will mark the discovery of the far-reaching applicability of the Healthy Parks Healthy People approach, beyond the parks sector in urban planning, climate change, education, public transport, hospital care, fitness and mental health, tourism, community development, and more.

The congress will unite youth, governments, businesses, and indigenous peoples in partnerships from beyond the conservation world, where a new shared ambition can inspire concerted global actions to sustain environments and improve the health of individuals and communities worldwide.

Working Beyond the Boundaries at Werribee Park

The success of all actions and policies often hinges on harnessing local support. The importance of community involvement in sustaining parks is shown in the result from Parks Victoria's partnership with Conservation Volunteers Australia, an organisation that manages and involves locals as well as international volunteers from both corporate and government sectors in environmental protection projects. Since 2009, this partnership has provided over 31,600 hours of community volunteer work, ranging from carrying out native endangered wildlife surveys to weeding and native seed planting. Meanwhile, one needs to look no further than to Werribee Park in Victoria for an outstanding example of the Healthy Parks Healthy People approach and a groundswell of action that has benefitted both the parkland and the well-being of the local community.

Werribee Park is located just 30 minutes from Melbourne and covers 10 hectares of beautiful formal gardens and open space. It is steeped in heritage consisting of numerous cultural heritage sites, the historic Werribee Park Mansion, Victoria State Rose Garden, and more. Since 1990, the Werribee area has been experiencing rapid suburban growth, including recently arrived refugee communities, such as the Karen community, which was an isolated group of Burmese refugees. "Working beyond the Boundaries" is an initiative by Parks Victoria aimed at finding different ways to engage local communities to enhance their interactions with both parkland and people.



2. Improving accessibility with beach wheelchairs at Wilsons Promontory National Park.



3. Members of the Karen community working with park rangers in the Werribee Park kitchen garden.



4. Replanting of a garden bed at Werribee Park as part of the Working beyond the Boundaries programme.


The project started in August 2012 as a community kitchen gardening programme to address some of the mental health issues, including depression and isolation for women from the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) refugee communities.

In the beginning, the female volunteers from the Karen community were fearful of visiting Werribee Park and wary of the rangers in uniform. However, the continual outreach efforts of the rangers eventually made the volunteers feel welcome and the park became an outlet for their passion in gardening as well as a place for them to meet and socialise with the existing community. Today, the Karen community has helped to transform a number of dormant garden beds into thriving kitchen gardens full of fruits, vegetables, and herbs for harvesting and for the enjoyment of all visitors. Meanwhile, the younger members of the community had also begun to take an interest

in horticulture and it was found that many of them face difficulties in gaining employment owing to linguistic barriers. Taking the Healthy Parks Healthy People approach to another level, Parks Victoria partnered with a number of agencies, including Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES), state and federal governments, and the Brotherhood of St Laurence, to develop an education facility in Werribee Park together with a park internship and training programme for CALD communities.

Working beyond the Boundaries now provides young participants with the opportunity to attend classes on workplace English, horticulture, conservation, and land management under accredited trainers. Trainees undertaking the six-month state-funded Parks Victoria ranger internship programme work alongside rangers for three days a week while undertaking their certificate courses. The initiative has rejuvenated Werribee Park by creating and sustaining a vibrant garden that produces fresh vegetables for the Werribee Mansion Hotel restaurant. It has also improved the health and well-being of the local community by helping to integrate newcomers and equipping youths with skills for gaining meaningful employment.

Conclusion

The Healthy Parks Healthy People approach can drive an impetus for divergent sectors to come together globally and locally to protect two of the world's most important assets: nature and humanity. Increasingly, and almost ironically, many people are coming to realise that the fact that people and their environment are intrinsically linked is not radical new thinking, but rediscovering what our ancestors understood. The health of individuals and communities are reliant on a healthy parks system, and a healthy parks system is in turn integrally linked to the value placed on it by the community. 

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