



16 April 2008

Garnaut Climate Change Review

**Re: Submission of Information for Garnaut Climate Change Review**

Thank you the meeting several weeks ago with myself and our National President, Mr Steve Mason regarding the impact of climate change on the parks and leisure industry – and the consequent impact on the lifestyle of all Australians who use open space and built environments in the pursuit of a quality of life.

As stated at that meeting, our association represents over 2000 members, all of whom play a significant role in the planning, education, management and maintenance of public environments which offer urban leisure environments such as playgrounds; sportsfields; parks; pools and walking tracks.

Please find attached, additional information which highlights many of the community impacts that Parks and Leisure Australia believe need to be recognised in a report such as that being prepared by Professor Garnaut. I have focused the submission around the “people and places” relationships rather than just physical water restrictions.

Thanking you for your time

Regards

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## **SUBMISSION: GARNAUT CLIMATE CHANGE REVIEW**

City living involves an extraordinary disengagement of humans from the natural environment that is likely to be detrimental to health and wellbeing. It has been reported that modern people are experiencing a spiritual famine and that alcohol, food, and drug addictions are futile attempts to fill the spiritual emptiness that has arisen from loss of contact with nature. In terms of health, parks have been viewed almost exclusively as venues for leisure and sport. Yet recent research shows that 'green nature', such as parks, can reduce crime, foster psychological wellbeing, reduce stress, boost immunity, enhance productivity, and promote healing. In fact, the positive effects on human health, particularly in urban environments, cannot be over-stated.

It seems likely, that human interactions with nature through parks may have significant capacity for building social capital. Evidence in the literature shows that nature is positive for health in terms of recovering from stress, improving concentration and productivity, and improving psychological state. Furthermore, related studies clearly demonstrate that being in a natural environment affects people positively, particularly in terms of mental health.

In addition, the World Health Organisation in 2002 instigated a global push to reduce obesity through physical activity, with each participating country developing particular strategies in addressing the issue – all have a similar theme – get the community more physically active. This information links people, places and impacts in a significant social fabric of society.

Communities use and value their public open space as an essential part of the urban built form. Many community development and health initiatives currently being promoted by federal, state and local government agencies advocate the increased use and provision of public open space as part of building fitness and quality of life for communities. Parks and Leisure Australia (PLA) support these endeavours, however to have any lasting impact, PLA believes that environments for active programs need to be sustainable at the local level in order to meet genuine community needs. These programs can not be sustainable at the local level if climate change and reduced maintenance regimes, due to access to water reduce facilities, playing fields and parks. The work of Parks and Leisure Australia has found that many parks, playing fields and sports grounds are struggling under the weight of demand, the impact of climate change and the access to appropriate water.

Research by Wilkinson (1999) states that the quality of people's social relations seems to have a powerful influence on their health. Wilkinson (1999) goes on to highlight research by Berkman (1995, in Wilkinson, 1999) and House et al. (1988) which 'reported death rates two or three times as high among people with low levels of social integration compared to people with high levels'.

At an individual level, Baum (1999) reports on a US study by Kawachi et al. (1996, in Baum, 1999) which found that, by comparison with 'people who had many social ties, those who were socially isolated were 6.59 times less likely to survive a stroke, 3.22 times more likely to commit suicide and 1.59 times less likely to survive coronary heart disease'. While the relationship between social capital and health has been the subject of considerable research and reflection, the relationship between social capital and the biophysical environment is only now beginning to be explored.

Hawe and Shiell (2000) highlight the lack of exploration of place-level effects within the literature on social capital, but even they do not specifically refer to the effects of place in terms of biophysical environments. One strand of work linking social capital and the environment has been the work of the Civic Practices Network on 'civic environmentalism'.

Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that engagement in civic environmentalism (through groups such as Friends of Parks) has spin-off social capital benefits in addition to the benefits that such groups were originally designed to achieve. One of the key elements of social capital is 'civic

engagement'. Putnam (1995) states that dense networks of interaction probably broaden participants' sense of self, developing the 'I' into the 'we'. If we consider the anecdotal evidence, and Putnam's (1995) observations, in the light of Frumkin's (2001) evidence of the effects of wilderness experience in increasing capacity for cooperation and trust, it seems likely that human interactions with nature through parks may have significant capacity for building social capital. It is interesting to note the 'symbiotic' relationship between social and natural capital.

The modern emphasis of parks is almost exclusively on their use as a venue for leisure and sport (Rohde & Kendle, 1997). Aside from this, parks are viewed as optional amenities rather than as necessary components of urban (as well as rural) infrastructure (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989), not to mention the prevailing lack of awareness about opportunities for enhancing health provided by larger, wilderness parks such as National Parks.

Despite the prevailing emphasis on sport and leisure, park management agencies have long focused on the social and environmental values of parks. For example, the Canadian Parks/Recreation Association published 'The Benefits Catalogue' (1997) documenting the health and wellbeing benefits of all aspects of recreation, including that carried out in parks. In Australia, the recent repositioning of Parks Victoria's key message to 'Healthy Parks, Healthy People' acknowledges the symbiotic relationship between parks and people (de Kievit, 2001). However, although the government and much of the community are aware of how people can benefit parks the benefits that parks bestow on people (in terms of health and wellbeing) through contact with nature are unrecognised.

Leisure and recreation experiences in natural environments probably reduce stress through a number of mechanisms, including a sense of control through active coping or escape, and the therapeutic effects of exposure to natural environments that most likely have learned as well as biological origins (Ulrich et al., 1991a). For example, many people each year flock to parks and wilderness areas for their annual holiday to 'experience' the wilderness, and the number of people seeking these experiences is increasing (Freimund & Cole, 2001).

Recreation in the natural settings provided by parks is becoming increasingly important as our lives become dominated by indoor activities. Some authors anticipate that allowing people to interact with nature (such as spending time in parks during the working week) to reduce tension, increase competence and productivity, will eventually become socially accepted and actively encouraged (S.Kaplan in Lewis, 1996). Pursuing recreation in a park setting enables people to develop a clearer understanding of their relatedness to nature, which can influence their everyday lives and preferences (Martin, 1996). This can have quite a powerful effect as a form of intervention treatment as used in wilderness therapy (see section titled 'Health Benefits of Nature: in Practice').

Clearly the impact of climate change on the reduction of natural places such as parks; streetscapes and even urban backyards significantly reduces the fabric of society in its connectedness with communities. This aspect and impact of the reduction of space and place cannot be forgotten nor minimized in the recognition of impact. It is important to recognize that climate change has a significant impact of social connectedness.

## References

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