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Considering people, adding value, maintaining relevance: Strategies and tactics to increase the usage of public parks

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Abstract

In 2000 an assessment was made of three asset management plans (Manawatu District Council, New Plymouth District Council and Wanganui District Council) to ascertain how these three nominated local authorities supported their community's need for recreation in a public park environment. As a focus of the study, and based upon the lack of leisure focus and programme development, Pukekura Park, New Plymouth was selected for analysis using SWOT and non-use matrix analysis techniques. Spatial redesign, development of partnerships, redesign of parks information systems through integration with the school curriculum and methods of catering for the aged and physically impaired were put forward as a means of increasing user participation. All redevelopments were to be capable of implementation at acceptable cost and with minimum disruption to normal functioning of the park.

INTRODUCTION

While much is written regarding park management there remains a need to convert theory into practice. Managers must be aware of user needs and their capacity to fulfil these needs. They must look beyond everyday practice and have a future vision, not assume that they are right in what they do just because 'they have always done it that way'. There is a continual requirement upon management to assess what is present and act to achieve improvements that meet present and future societal needs.

As an ongoing assessment of parks and recreation resources a regional study was carried out of the asset management plans of three local authorities located in the lower half of the North Island, New Zealand.¹ The asset management plans of the nominated local authorities were assessed based upon recommendations made in the New Zealand 'Infrastructure Asset Management Manual'.² All three asset management plans reflected a strong emphasis on managing the physical resource. While the manual has a strong

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emphasis upon physical management of assets, frequent reference is made to service, in particular quality gaps — namely the perceived difference by the consumer between expected service ('What I want'), and the perceived service ('What I get'). The recommendation from the manual for asset managers is outlined as:

Asset management plans

'Understanding of customers' expectations and perceptions of levels of service, and ensuring AM plans reflect the changing needs of customers and changes in legislation, requires that asset managers implement a service level review process. Ideally this process should be ongoing rather than a snapshot capturing only a moment in time. Only when these snapshots are taken regularly do they tell a story of patterns and trends.'³

The manual continued to state that: 'An important component of AM planning is research to predict future trends which will impact upon the level of service to be provided.'⁴

In 1987 and 1993 surveys into local government policies and goals, prior to and after local government reform in New Zealand,⁵ indicated a marked emphasis upon goals associated with:

- beautification of open space
- maintenance of parks
- allocation of land resources to meet recreational needs.

Local authority goals

By comparison goals focusing upon actual utilisation of park resources ranked very poorly. Among lower-ranked goals were:

- providing for those with special physical and mental needs
- enhancement of the family unit
- provision of services for ethnic, cultural and minority groups
- providing opportunities for self-expression
- equipping people with skills necessary for participating in leisure activities
- recruiting, training and utilising volunteers
- enhancing intellectual growth.

The only people-focused goals ranked in the top ten in 1993 were:

- provision of services for children
- provision of services for adults.

These ranked ninth and tenth respectively, but were envisaged to decrease in importance to 21st and 25th in the future.

In 1993 'conducting research studies on a continual basis to determine community needs' ranked 27th of the current 60 goals.⁶ It was difficult to perceive how the third ranked future goal of involving staff/community in the planning and decision-making process was to be achieved given the lack of community

People versus plant focus?

involvement in the process through research. Based upon assessment of the asset management plans within the assessment, research into community needs did not appear to have assumed a higher priority and could be seen as both a potential weakness and a critical omission of the plans reviewed.

Against this background an objective analysis of Pukekura Park, the centrepiece of New Plymouth District Council's parks, was initiated in 2000 to ascertain what current emphasis was placed upon research of community needs, and whether a 'people focus' as opposed to a 'horticultural/beautification focus' had developed. The Pukekura Park management plan⁷ outlined issues as being:

- a lack of car parking
- a lack of directional signs
- a lack of visitor information
- poor access within the park, including track surfaces
- poor interpretational signage.

Assessment of the park management plan, together with site evaluation and observation, indicated no significant research had been implemented in the interim, resulting in the deficiencies from 1993 being present in 2000. Preliminary discussions with the park manager identified a lack of focus upon people management in the park environment. A key issue of actual usage — based upon either an increase of frequency of current visitors, introduction of new visitors, increase time spent per visit, or a combination of these — was seen as desirable, but not at the expense of environmental management. Using lower-ranked goals from the Wrigley and Philp⁸ survey, an effort was to be made to illustrate how to address specific issues in a cost-effective manner.

DEVELOPING A USER FOCUS STRATEGY

Popular literature indicates declining or static use of many public park spaces. Gold⁹ placed regular park usage at around 10 per cent of the population, with individuals spending a decreasing quantity of time on each visit. Robinson and Godbey¹⁰ report similar patterns of how Americans use their time.

Current initiatives

By adopting a user, rather than horticulture, focus it may be possible to initiate higher visitation and satisfaction levels. This has been undertaken to a limited extent using successful initiatives such as the annual Festival of the Lights that encourages up to 10,000 visitors on individual summer evenings to Pukekura Park. However, this fails to translate into higher usage at other times. Upgrading of a key feature in the park — the children's zoo and associated playground — also enhances localised use, but fails to increase utilisation of many other areas. The zoo can attract up to 300 people at any one time, by comparison the dell might attract 15 to 20 people on the same day. Such developments, while valid, place added strain on already well-utilised resources without

providing the visitor with a broader park experience. The focus of park management should be on maintaining this momentum of visitation by engaging in other proactive activities. It needs to be acknowledged that the park has a core of visitors who could be deemed 'regulars'. Any strategy should not disenfranchise current participants, but increase total numbers of users within sustainable limits and thereby improve quality of visitation for both current and potential users.

Old design, current needs

Pukekura Park and its closely associated Bowl of Brooklands and Brooklands Park have considerably more potential for users than currently exists. The current park design reflects an excellent example of a 19th-century walking park, with a focus on walking for pleasure, occasional recitals and boating on the lake. The question management must address is whether this public park reflect the needs of a 21st-century community. In part it probably does, but as society changes, with increasing focus upon technological developments, differences in available leisure time and changes to the family unit, it is necessary to refocus strategies associated with maintaining public park space in a manner that is relevant to today's communities. In this way future economic support similar to that experienced from utility companies with the Festival of the Lights is likely to be maintained or become available. A park system not meeting community needs is more likely to face pressure from politicians and ratepayers to lower expenditure and resultant outputs.¹¹ While this has not occurred at Pukekura Park, pressure in general is being experienced to curtail expenditure to avert the need for rate increases.

Identifying potential users

Wrigley and Philp¹² identified that the future second-ranked goal was to 'develop long range goals and strategies'. While there are proven processes for physical park management, there are few that concentrate on aspects of people management. This is true in Pukekura Park, as in other places. An initial method of attempting to increase utilisation would be to identify groups and organisations that may be potential users of the resource, implement simple surveys as to visitation needs and then use follow up surveys to see whether needs are being met, or how better to cater for these needs. In this way, by setting preliminary visitation level objectives, management could initiate targets to which to aspire and proactively create a user database that is currently *ad hoc* hearsay. Examples of visitation level strategy outcomes might be the following:

- Have every school within the New Plymouth catchment make two educational visits to the park per year. This to be linked to non-physical (sports-based) aspects of the curriculum.
- Have every regional senior citizen establishment make three visits to the park per year.
- Have 30 clubs (not currently renting facilities) use the park as a venue for an activity.

Table 1: Major causes of non-use in neighbourhood parks

Behavioural	Environmental	Institutional
User orientation*	Convenient access*	Goal differences*
Social restraints*	Site characteristics*	Personal safety*
Previous conditioning	Weather and climate	Relevant programme
Competing activities	Physical location	Management practices
User satisfaction	Facilities and development	Maintenance levels

*Most significant in each category relative to all factors (as rated by Gold)

- Have 70 per cent of church groups use the park as a venue for one activity per year.
- Have 30 business houses use the park as a venue for one activity per year.
- Have a minimum of 30 parent centre, kindergarten or child-care facility visits to the park per year.

Quantifiable targets and simple survey implementation based upon sectors may yield useful user focused information to direct development for park management.

SWOT AND NON-USE MATRIX APPLICATIONS

As part of a review process SWOT analysis, combined with Gold's¹³ major causes of non-use in neighbourhood parks matrix (Table 1) and incorporating concepts of Goodale and Witt¹⁴ and Crawford *et al.*,¹⁵ was used to identify what might contribute to sub-optimal park utilisation. While in general practitioners in park management have a good understanding of participation data, the information derived from surveys mainly addresses issues of current users. Addressing the issues by understanding what might contribute to non-use is seen as an alternative approach by Pukekura Park's management that potentially could highlight previously overlooked problems.

While not practical to report all aspects of these factors in relation to Pukekura Park, indicative examples can be provided.

Playground analysis (for enhancement of the family unit)

Playground analysis was based upon a combination of current use, focus group discussion and compliance with safety standards, using as a basis the non-use matrix and applying these in a SWOT analysis (Table 2).

While park management was cognitive of the strengths of the playground area, many weaknesses had not been previously acknowledged or addressed.

Strategies for improving play area utilisation

A key to increasing usage is to create a more appropriate facility for potential mixed use rather than merely use as a playground. Adopting a limited focus, combined with substandard ancillary facility development, does little to enhance regular and repeated use

Addressing non-use issues

Table 2: Playground analysis (for enhancement of the family unit)

	Behavioural				Environmental		Institutional			
	User orientation*	Social restraints*	Previous conditioning	Competing activities	User satisfaction	Convenient access*	Site characteristics*	Weather and climate	Physical location	Facilities and development
	Goal differences*	Personal safety*	Relevant programme	Management practices	Maintenance levels					
Strengths										
Playground meets safety standards										
Excellent shelter from wind										
Good range of play equipment for toddler through to adolescent										
Area between water and toddlers zone has fencing										
Weaknesses										
Sibling supervision minimised by polarised locations of the toddler and older juvenile play equipment	X	X	X	X					X	X
Toilet block behind seating rather imposing and demands attention in terms of supervision that could divert one from other children at play	X	X	X		X			X		X
Very little to warrant older caregivers remaining in the area for longer periods	X		X	X				X		
People with dogs off leashes (often joggers) pose threat to juvenile users (not necessarily through biting but by aspects of size or presence)	X		X	X						X
Minimal zone in which to kick a ball around	X		X	X				X		
Chains on the swings for toddlers do not allow for sufficient arc of swing	X	X							X	
Lack of programmed activities that might encourage use	X			X						X
Safety surfaces may hide undesirable substances (dog faeces/glass/syringes)		X	X							X
Inadequate nearby parking			X	X	X					
Poor ergonomic design of table/seats in the picnic zone that fail to allow for children to sit and eat with comfort			X	X	X			X		
Tables located in high sun exposure areas			X	X	X			X		
Lack of adequate changing facilities for paddlers pool users and parents with very young children			X	X	X	X		X		
Poor winter drainage of central grassed area										
Location in close proximity to water (stream, waterwheel and lake) provides easy opportunities for children to stray into dangerous locations		X								X
Long distances to carry food/barbeque to site for multipurpose visit					X			X		
Site located a distance from the only concessionaire (ice-cream/drink) sales point								X	X	
Poor signage directing people to the area									X	
Opportunities										
Many childcare centres, kindergartens and parent centre groups are potential clients of the zone for non-peak use times (ie non-weekend activity)										
Threats										
Commercialised recreation for young children	X	X	X							
Preconceived attitudes of parents as to potential 'stranger danger' associated with park locations	X									
Ratepayers perceiving parks as a lower priority spending area and influencing councils to economise on lower use areas or parks in general			X							

*Most significant in each category relative to all factors (as rated by Gold)

Multi-purposing strategies

by families. Key points that need addressing include preconceived concerns of users, safety, diversification of potential uses and appropriate ancillary feature development. Consideration should also be given to integrating age group equipment in order to facilitate family sibling interaction.

Strategy 1: Enhance safety — erection of a perimeter safety barrier aimed at retaining children within the space while preventing dogs entering the space. The close proximity to surrounding water and bushes potentially enhances opportunities for accidents and ‘stranger danger’. The central location of caregiver seating (between either ends of the playground) means it is difficult to monitor children playing at both sites simultaneously. The common inclination of caregivers to read while supervising means children can easily disappear from sight into surrounding bushes without being noticed.

Strategy 2: Site diversification — inclusion of barbeque facilities. The distances between available parking and playground discourage family-based activities that could extend visitation to the site. Incorporating either gas or electric barbeques adjacent to the picnic tables would increase scope for meal options in the area.

Strategy 3: Ancillary feature development — the provision of toilet/changing facilities, more appropriately designed picnic tables and closer parking zones. Currently toilet facilities are located to the rear of the playground behind caregivers. The existing facilities are old and dark, with low-quality sanitary surfaces, and lack baby-care facilities that are appropriate for this zone. Currently picnic tables are used as changing tables, inherently posing health risks. By incorporating a high-quality unisex toilet, with changing facilities for babies, sited within the perimeter fencing, security and health issues would be addressed. Current picnic table design is for people 1.4m high or taller. The inability of young children to sit and feed at the tables discourages use of the area for picnics. To involve children they either have to be nursed or sat on the table. The first is inconvenient and the second can be unhygienic. Adapting ends of existing tables (by building elevated seats) can involve children in the family experience at relatively low cost. Changes in family structure (towards higher numbers of solo parent families or families that may have only one caregiver present) imply that travel distances where both children and goods are to be transported should be minimised, for supervisory reasons. Enlarging nearby parking facilities would aid caregivers in dealing with transport issues and enhance group opportunities for using the facility.

Ancillary servicing essential

Greenhouse display area analysis (for enhancement of intellectual growth and servicing of minority groups)

Greenhouse analysis was based upon a combination of current use and focus group discussion, using as a basis the non-use matrix and applying these in a SWOT analysis (Table 3).

Table 3: Greenhouse display area analysis (for enhancement of intellectual growth, servicing of minority groups)

[illegible]

*Most significant in each category relative to all factors (as rated by Gold)

Strategies for improving greenhouse utilisation

Historically the area has provided a site for protected growth of plants. While this serves the plant enthusiast, the modernised structure is capable of accommodating a range of activities. The upper level, with its concrete base and mezzanine floor overlooking the remaining display houses, could be better exploited by reducing

Activity-based spaces

plant allocated areas and converting these to people focused zones.

Strategy 1: Provision of people focused resources to expand use patterns. By reducing the volume of plant material, providing direct disabled access to the upper display areas and incorporating seating and tables throughout parts of the facility it is possible to create a higher degree of space for people to linger, observe and interact. Disabled access is necessary and there is potential for relaxed observation would be increased significantly. By providing a table-based environment the upper display-house to be rearranged to allow for club-based activities (particularly for the elderly, in a pleasant aesthetic environment), class-based activities for school groups, or for special occasion activities such as small group weddings in the park. Additional facilities that should be incorporated are a unisex disabled toilet on the upper level and a small area suited to coffee- and tea-making facilities. A reduction in display plant material may lower operational costs. Sponsorship could be considered to defray expenses. The facility could be booked and charges made for specific users.

Strategy 2: Development of a (weather protected) learning centre. As part of the human focus the upper display-house could be developed for education purposes either with interactive monitors that display general horticultural information or links to other park developments. Provision of simple visual aid equipment such as overhead projectors and television monitors with video could allow for volunteers to provide lectures to children or the general public. This could be extended as funding and technology permitted to incorporate interactive computer technology.

Signage (for enhancement of intellectual growth and servicing of minority groups)

Communicating effectively

Signage is an important means of communicating a message in the park environment. Park signage tends to be directional rather than informative in an intellectual or fitness context. By refocusing signage to meet a more diverse range of purposes, overall park usage could be enhanced. Signage analysis was based upon a combination of current use and focus group discussion, using as a basis the non-use matrix and applying these in a SWOT analysis (Table 4).

Strategies for improving general park utilisation

Provision of relevant information can contribute to intellectual growth and stimulate visitation to areas that are currently underutilised.

Strategy 1: Identification of location by using comprehensive park maps at key intersections. The linear nature of the park (being over two kilometres in length and varying in width from 300 to 500 metres) and surrounding bush can frequently mean that orienting one's position in the park is difficult. Increasing the number of park maps at a range of key sites (indicating the visitor's location at each station) will enable more appropriate

Table 4: Signage analysis (for enhancement of intellectual growth, servicing of minority groups)

	Behavioural				Environmental			Institutional							
	User orientation*	Social restraints*	Previous conditioning	Competing activities	User satisfaction	Convenient access*	Site characteristics*	Weather and climate	Physical location	Facilities and development	Goal differences*	Personal safety*	Relevant programme	Management practices	Maintenance levels
Strengths															
Directional signage is present at most major intersecting pathways															
Weaknesses															
Park topography and track condition vary significantly but are inadequately communicated to park visitors	X	X	X	X				X				X			
A lack of historic information or interpretation signage that indicates the importance of sites and features relevant to the community	X	X											X		
Plant information signs are limited to botanic and common name	X	X	X										X		
The lack of overall site maps at reasonable intervals/locations means visitors with poor site knowledge can easily become disoriented				X				X							
Directional signs lack impact, often with small lettering								X							
Lack of programmes that could replace or supplement signage													X		
Opportunities															
A broad section of groups in the community could contribute quality information to a signage system being developed															
As many plants have historic, commercial, medicinal, ethnic and spiritual significance there is potential to use the park as a multidisciplinary learning resource															
Linking park signage to school curriculum would enable the education sector to utilise park resources more actively															
Threats															
Park users viewing the park as being only an area of horticultural significance		X													
Commercial/private gardens undermining need for a public park system			X												

*Most significant in each category relative to all factors (as rated by Gold)

selection of future trail/site visitation. Identifying key nearby features such as lookouts, historic sites or plants may encourage increasingly diverse park use.

Strategy 2: Development of comprehensive signs for places and plants of significance. School curricula contain diverse elements¹⁶ that extend beyond basic plant information such as botanic name, common name, origin and height. Improving the quality and diversity of signs to incorporate significant information on a plant's cultural and ecological end uses (of plant wood/by-products), economic implications, historic medicinal uses, management (if a cultivated crop) and spiritual uses has considerable merit. This has

Plants as diverse learning tools

potential to involve a wide range of people, such as diverse ethnic groups (from indigenous to immigrants), enthusiasts and specialists in a number of areas (herbalists, ornithologists, historians) and commercial venture operators (pharmacists, timber merchants). An example is kauri (*Agathus australis*), a tree that has a strong cultural significance in both Maori and European settlements. This was the tree of first choice for northern Maori canoe builders. Maoris used kauri gum as a fuel and for making rudimentary torches. The ash was mixed as a dye used in tattooing and fresh kauri resin was eaten as a form of chewing gum. Europeans realised the kauri's usefulness in shipbuilding since its large size provided ideal spars for sailing ships. Early Yugoslavian immigrants to the north and west Auckland areas were gum diggers, harvesting resin for making into shellac. They brought with them a wine-making capability that impacted on future industry in New Zealand. Kauri timber is still widely sought after for boat and furniture building. A tree does not have to be only a tree. It is a living lesson in social and economic history. Concepts such as growth rates and volumetric measures can be linked to the mathematics curriculum. The dynamic importance of nature can be explored. Statistics such as tree age, girth and height using information about specimens exceeding 20m in girth (with clear trunks to over 30m) have been recorded¹⁷ and can be utilised in classroom studies. Enhancing knowledge on a more passive level could be achieved in conjunction with other cultural and educational events within the park, from craft displays to educational talks on propagation.

Treasure trails

Strategy 3: Trail marking and development of treasure trails. To facilitate increased use of the less utilised tracks and bush areas, trail markers designating walks or jogging trails for varying degrees of fitness could be developed in conjunction with local walking/jogging clubs. Based upon an improved quality of signage information (strategy 2), treasure trails can be developed where significant plants located at a variety of places are theme linked and mapped (based upon criteria suggested in strategy 2). This trail information could be supplied to educational groups as part of school-based curricula activities.

Strategy 4: Implementing guided walks policy. This could supplement strategy 3 and be partnered with the 'Friends of Pukekura Park'.

PARTNERSHIPS

Developing partnerships is a method of lowering the cost of implementing a number of strategies, particularly those associated with circulation. Currently a 'Friends of the Park' group exists whose self-determined function appears to act as a guardian/overseer group of Pukekura Park. Historically the group has proactively and reactively had input into some horticultural aspects of park management. Considerable expertise exists within the group, with a number of 'friends' having been prominent previous

Partnership development

employees of the park. As volunteers 'friends' can contribute considerable expertise via interpretative information (signage, guided tours, talks) that is underutilised by current park management. To develop a working partnership the current park's management needs to supply logistical support in terms of venues (possibly in conjunction with greenhouse redevelopment) and funding for signage, and clearly signal ways in which the 'friends' can be a part of the process.

Varied park terrain allows for a range of fitness trails to be developed within the park area. Most persons using the park as a running venue tend to focus their activity around the lake and bush pathways. A joggers' club that meets every Sunday near the park's main entrance could be partnered with to develop a series of trails of varying degrees of difficulty for park joggers. Involving Sport Taranaki (the regionally funded sports development group) in trail development should be contemplated. Once recognition of the park for athletics is enhanced, promotions using it as part of a national duathlon or triathlon venue could provide exposure encouraging tourist visitation.

Within 400 metres of Pukekura Park's main entrance is a miniature railway enthusiast group operating a railway system on a small, bleak residential section. Due to the linear nature of the Pukekura Park, with the main children's playground and the Brookland's zoo/playground being polarised approximately 2km apart at opposite ends of the park, the potential exists for a transportation system. While a motorised vehicle exists for carrying disabled persons in the park, this is inappropriate and inadequate for transportation of large numbers of visitors. Forming a partnership with the miniature railway enthusiasts could provide an entertaining railway system capable of being accommodated on broad park pathways. In theory, funds from the sale of the prime location section, on which the miniature railway is based, could be used towards the costs of laying track in the park.

Partnerships can be as varied as the people who potentially use the park system. The key to partnerships is not to compromise existing users, but to enhance the ways in which they can utilise the resource themselves while adding value for other participants.

CONCLUSION

Park managers can be reluctant to involve themselves in the type of human issues and resource utilisation that dominated the low-priority goals in the study of Wrigley and Philp.¹⁸ Failing to address critical issues leading to non-use, particularly behavioural issues, further hinders many of these low-priority goals. Developing a user focus within a park system does not have to be a costly exercise, particularly if partnerships can be developed and effective use made of volunteers. Adopting a user focus does require a different mind-set from traditional parks management, where provision of facilities with little regard for how they could be better

Changing mindsets

used frequently prevails. A parks system that supports community use in a variety of ways is likely to benefit from increased visitation and vocal/political support. A park that continues to cater only in a historic context is itself likely to be consigned to history through pressure of declining visitation and decreased funding.

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