

Abstract

There is accumulating evidence of benefits to the health and well-being of individuals and communities from the availability of open space within and close to urban areas. New Zealand has become highly urbanized by world standards (88% urban 2005) and there is expected to be greater emphasis in future city development on high density housing. This project explores self-perceived benefits of visits to a large peri-urban 'green' area in a local setting using the Belmont Regional Park (3459 Ha, Wellington) as a case study. The recent purchase in 2005 of a significant area of this land (1200 Ha) as a permanent part of the park in public ownership has also highlighted the need to provide evidence of some benefits of the expenditure to local communities.

Three approaches were used: data from on-site visitor surveys (and comparable data from other regional parks), qualitative information from in-depth interviews with key informants, and a focus group session. These sources presented complementary information – the surveys provided a profile of park visitors and characteristics of their visits, while the interviews and focus group session contributed to appreciation of different perspectives and values concerning the park.

The park is a setting that can provide both individuals and group outdoor activity experiences that benefit both personal and community wellbeing. For this purpose the concept of 'wellbeing' was considered to include six key components. Of these the benefits from physical activity were the most widely recognized, although all components were perceived to some degree from those visits. Thus, the park was found to be a very good setting for a holistic wellbeing experience, and therefore also a good setting for the promotion of healthy lifestyles. In addition, visits to the park were rich in social aspects (implicit in the data and qualitative information) even though this was not widely acknowledged. For instance, people that visited with company tended to spend more time in the park and perceived more components of wellbeing while there (χ^2 hs). Although social aspects of park visits were not the focal point of this study, they were present in both quantitative and qualitative information.

Park visitors were not representative of local communities and therefore, the park may be under-used by those who live close, and this may relate to factors such as transport, local knowledge and personal motivation. Moreover, participants in self-organized visits to park and organized activities have different characteristics. Furthermore, different people are

attracted to visit by the context of their visit, as well as by particular features of the park, and for some, by perceptions of personal safety.

Belmont Regional Park has diverse fauna, flora and geography that can provide for different uses and activities, and has the potential to attract a variety of visitors and to contribute to the enhancement of their wellbeing. The results presented in this project can be used to incorporate health and wellbeing into recreation resource management plans and as a basis for health promotion materials or initiatives.