Western Sydney Parklands – Australia’s Largest Urban Park

LINDA CORKERY & NOEL CORKERY
Large urban parks have dual roles to play in meeting the demands of rapidly growing metropolitan areas. On one hand, they provide essential open space recreation facilities for local residents and visitors, while on the other hand, they conserve and protect urban biodiversity. Research confirms the crucial role public open space plays for the health and well being of communities. Large urban parks are particularly significant in allowing urban dwellers to enjoy recreation in a natural setting. However, achieving a sustainable balance between these two roles requires careful management, ongoing monitoring and research, and an ability to adapt to the changing needs of constituents.

The Western Sydney Parklands (WSP) is a prime example of how a contemporary large park fulfills these dual roles. Located in western Sydney, the fastest growing area in the Sydney basin, the Parklands cover some 5,280 ha and extend for 25 km, constituting the largest area of consolidated parkland in Australia.

The context of the Parklands in relation to metropolitan Sydney, major urban growth centres and proposed second international airport is illustrated in Figure 2.

The development of the WSP originated from a series of policy decisions by successive state governments beginning in 1948 with New South Wales County of Cumberland Planning Scheme. Twenty years later, the concept of a major regional open space corridor in western Sydney was proposed in the 1968 Sydney Region Outline Plan. In 1989, the State Environmental Planning Policy No 29—Western Sydney Recreation Area provided for development of key recreational facilities within the corridor, including the Eastern Creek International Raceway. The Policy also identified opportunities to develop venues for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, including equestrian, shooting, baseball/softball, and mountain biking facilities. Gazettel of the Sydney Regional Environmental Plan (SREP) No 31—Regional Parklands in 2001 created a framework for coordinated management of the landscape values and facilities throughout the Parklands.

Recognising the need for a farsighted vision to underpin a coherent management framework, in 2004 the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources (DIPNR) engaged a multi-disciplinary team of consultants to prepare The Western Sydney Parklands Management Vision and Concept Plan Options. The Parklands Management Vision was generated through a series of workshops involving experts in park planning and management and overseen by an Advisory Group. To facilitate interaction among a diverse group of participants, a discussion paper was prepared that reviewed a number of large parks around the world, drawing out key research findings and trends. The following principles were incorporated in the Parklands Management Vision:

- achieve a balance between ecological conservation, recreation facilities and cultural values
- recognize the link between community health and ecological systems health
- develop a clear image and branding
- create opportunities for sustainable agriculture together with defined public access rights
- enhance the potential for commercial recreation and tourism facilities
- involve the community in determining the programme of uses offered
- establish future ‘virtual’ links between the WSP
and its constituents through communications technology
• encourage industry sponsorship, partnerships, alliances and stewardship
• consider opportunities for environmental offset allowances
• explore options for the best–practice management structure and funding arrangements.

Following adoption of the management vision, the Western Sydney Parklands were subsequently created in 2006 by the Western Sydney Parklands Act, together with the Western Sydney Parklands Trust to manage them.

The generally rural landscape character of the Parklands is illustrated in Figure 1 (article cover) showing the extent of recreation and urban development as well as the M7 Motorway, running along the western edge.

Landscape analysis formed a key component of the research carried out to provide a solid basis for planning and management throughout the Parklands. The comprehensive analysis included landform, drainage, vegetation, habitat, bushfire risk, landscape visual values, heritage values, Aboriginal cultural significance, land uses, agricultural suitability, access and circulation.

Figure 3 shows the Parklands located on the catchment boundary between the Hawkesbury-Nepean River, Georges River and Parramatta River. It has the potential to play a key role in improving water quality and raising community awareness of water resources within the Sydney Region.

The fragmented pattern of remnant native
WESTERN SYDNEY PARKLANDS – AUSTRALIA’S LARGEST URBAN PARK
LINDA CORKERY & NOEL CORKERY

vegetation resulting from agricultural land uses and urban development is illustrated in Figure 4. The mapping shows the extent of various vegetation communities, which includes Cumberland Plain Woodland throughout the Parklands that is covered by a Recovery Plan.

The resulting Structure Plan generated by the Management Vision presented on Figure 5 provided for sustainable management of Parklands through the integration of Ecological Corridors, while allowing recreation uses outside of those corridors. The network of roads, pedestrian and cycle paths link facilities along the Parklands corridor, as well as giving connectivity to adjoining urban areas developing at the periphery.

A critical component of the Vision was defining an effective management structure for the Parklands. Numerous options were researched during the visioning workshops and a preferred option identified, which was the creation of the Western Sydney Parklands Trust as a State-owned enterprise. The Trust was provided with statutory authority to develop and manage the Parklands in partnership with other state and local government agencies. The State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP) Western Sydney Parkland offered the necessary land use flexibility to implement the Trust’s mandate under the Act.

The Trust’s current Plan of Management (2006) guides the development of the WSP’s facilities and programmes within a financially sustainable business strategy to 2020. The target percentage cover of various land uses to be achieved by 2020.

Social sustainability in the Parklands is evident in employment and training opportunities related to
These opportunities will expand as new facilities are developed and management activity increases throughout the Parklands.

Research carried out in 2004 by Linda Corkery and Nancy Marshall from the UNSW Faculty of Built Environment identified how residents of western Sydney valued open space and their awareness of the Parklands. Funded by the Australian Research Council the project was carried out with the NSW Lands Department as the linkage partner. It involved a ‘think tank’ workshop with planning experts, focus group sessions with stakeholders, and a field survey that captured over 1,000 responses. Findings from this research contributed to multiple perspectives on how the Parklands could become a widely identifiable, valued and well managed open space resource for Western Sydney.

Lessons provided by the Parklands are particularly relevant to professionals and decision makers engaged in the planning, design and management of other large urban parks. This knowledge will become increasingly valuable as state government policy focuses on greater urban density aimed at more efficient use of infrastructure, which will in turn increase demand for the use of public open space. Large urban parks will require effective management to protect biodiversity and cultural values as public recreation use increases. The resilience of urban parks will need to be strengthened to withstand the pressures of increased public usage and adapt to climate change.

WESTERN SYDNEY PARKLANDS – AUSTRALIA’S LARGEST URBAN PARK
LINDA CORKERY & NOEL CORKERY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the following people in preparing this paper: Sue Ellen Fitzgerald, Director, Parramatta Park & Western Sydney Parklands Trusts; David Kirkland, Principal Program Officer, Environment, PP & WSP Trusts; Bob Waldron, former Director of the NSW Department of Planning, Land Management Branch and founding board member of the WSP Trust.

WESTERN SYDNEY PARKLANDS
LINDA CORKERY & NOEL CORKERY

Image Credits |
1 (COVER) | View south over northern portion of Parklands | Corkery Consulting & WSP Trust
2 | Context of the Western Sydney Parklands | Corkery Consulting
3 | Landform and drainage catchments | URS & Turf Design Studio
4 | Vegetation communities mapping | URS & Turf Design Studio
5 | Parklands Structure Plan | URS & Turf Design Studio
6, 7, 8, 9 | Corkery Consulting

Text Credits
Linda Corkery & Noel Corkery