

Introduction

Penelope Figgis AO
Chair of the Sydney Olympic Park
Parklands Advisory Committee (2001-2011)

In 2001 I had the honour of being invited to serve on the board of the newly created Sydney Olympic Park Authority (SOPA), which was charged with the post-Olympics development of the site. I was subsequently appointed the Chair of the Parklands Advisory Committee, which oversaw the continuing development of one of the great legacies of the Olympics, the surrounding 425 hectares of public parklands.

This role, which I held over the following decade, took me into a largely new area of policy. Most of my life I had been an advocate for creating protected areas in large natural areas for their critical ecological, biodiversity, social and cultural values. I understood urban parks primarily as important recreational resources for relaxation, community gatherings, picnics, jogging, cycling and walking. The Board felt that as SOPA developed the urban core of the park as a hub for major business and residential development, the parklands would be a great asset to both residents and people in the wider area. However, working with our excellent staff, I soon realised that my familiar role of defending biodiversity was just as applicable to this unusual area. During the preparation for the Olympics various studies had been done which highlighted that despite its blighted industrial history surprising areas of both flora and fauna survived in the diverse environments of mangroves, saltmarshes, forest, grasslands and wetlands.

Our initial challenge was integrating the separate components of the parklands into a coherent whole. While Bicentennial Park was established and key areas of final parklands had been constructed, other areas were effectively remnants. Transforming these zones, which included a large dump site, into modern parklands would take time. We looked for a strategy to engage users to the park while enhancements occurred. The 35 kilometres of cycling and walking paths provided a rich and regionally rare resource. We engaged the cycling community, from the professionals to family groups, and sought their advice in making it a cycling haven. This resulted in a substantial number of people regularly using the parklands and discovering their multiple values as the pieces of the jigsaw like Wentworth Common, Newington Armory and Blaxland Common were transformed into healthy parklands, and other sites like the Brickpit and Badu wetlands were enhanced into welcoming spaces over the decade.

As each element of the parklands was planned we were very fortunate to have dedicated professional staff, excellent scientific advisors and designers, and good planning. As the new parklands zones were developed the commitment to biodiversity remained a priority (though there were many quips on the Board

about what other directors thought were better uses of the Brickpit than frog habitat!).

The story of the conservation of the endangered Green and Golden Bell Frog, the continued role of our wetlands for native and migratory birds, and the successful repeat breeding of White-bellied Sea-Eagles are some of the inspiring stories we are celebrating on this anniversary. These environments are relaxation and health assets to all users of the park – local communities, visitors, residents and workers. They also provide a wonderful education asset to the people of Sydney allowing city children to really experience nature close to home.

I write this as Australia and the world struggles with the often overwhelming implications of COVID-19 pandemic. We are all reflecting on the way we live and how we might live better in future. Many global experts have identified the rapid destruction of the natural world as a key component of this event. Even the World Economic Forum has published an article entitled '*Scientists warn worse pandemics are on the way if we don't protect nature*¹'.

There is also a strong argument that unless people have contact with nature, they will not value it and defend it. Hence urban parks have an important role in providing contact with nature to urban populations; to help in building the essential constituency of support needed for biodiversity conservation measures.

Parklands have played an important role through this immense challenge. Many people have discovered or rediscovered the joy of nature and the immense importance of green spaces both large and small in maintaining their physical and mental health. In doing so, they confirm growing scientific evidence around the world which supports that spending time in nature improves physical and mental health. Interestingly Australia, particularly through Parks Victoria, has been a leader in the concept of Healthy Parks Healthy People. This nature/health relationship will be a major theme at the next International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Conservation Congress.

During the IUCN World Parks Congress held in Sydney Olympic Park in 2014, the primary recommendation of the improving health and well-being stream was to "*Unlock the values of parks and protected areas for health and well-being, while conserving biodiversity.*" This seems a very useful summary of what I believe has been the vision of the Authority and what I hope remains its guiding mission.

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¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/scientists-pandemics-coronavirus-nature-covid19-health/>