

Community engagement with Melbourne's blue spaces before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

Project E5:

Blue Spaces

This project will directly inform Melbourne Water's decisions about future investments in enhancing the social value of its blue spaces in order to contribute to the physical and mental health and well-being of Melbourne's residents.

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Melbourne Water, together with its stakeholders, recognises that its waterways, wetlands and estuaries are important for Melbourne's residents. In response, they manage these blue spaces for their social values as well environmental values. The 2018 Healthy Waterways Strategy groups the values that people experience whilst visiting blue spaces into three types: amenity, recreation and community connection.

The restrictions imposed on residents of metropolitan Melbourne to contain the spread of coronavirus COVID-19 have drastically changed where and how individuals engage with the city and its elements. In terms of blue spaces, Melbourne Water's 2020 Community Perceptions Survey found that more than 30% of survey participants reported visiting their local waterways less frequently since the first Stage 3 restrictions were introduced; this increased to 42% in the first weeks of Stage 4 restrictions.

However, the results of the Community Perceptions Survey are at odds with an analysis of geo-located digital data, which reported a 112% increase in engagement with local natural spaces in Melbourne between February 2020 and May 2020 (Neighbourlytics 2020), together with informal observations made by the project team and other colleagues, who have consistently noted increased numbers of visitors to the waterways they personally engage with.

Aim

This project seeks to understand how the COVID-19 restrictions have changed community awareness of and engage-

ment with Melbourne's waterways and other blue spaces.

Methodology

This research is a collaboration between the MWRPP, Monash University and EA-WAG (Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology). It will be conducted as a combination of **survey** and **mapping** engagement with blue spaces.

The purpose of the survey is to extend on the findings of the 2020 Community Perceptions Survey and asks more targeted questions about how the use and awareness of local blue spaces has changed during the COVID-19 restrictions. It also seeks to understand why people have engaged more or less with blue spaces during the restrictions, how the use of blue spaces has benefited people and the nature of engagement with blue spaces that participants might have once restrictions are eased and/or removed altogether.

The reliability of surveys can be limited by the degree to which they are representative of the broader population. We therefore aim to complement the findings of this survey by quantifying the number of visits to blue spaces and length of time spent there using resident-generated data. We will analyse spatially and temporally explicit human movement data that provides coverage of the entire Melbourne Water region and information about the numbers of visitors to blue spaces before, during and after the COVID-19 restrictions.

This project will run for one year, and is expected to be completed by October 2021.