

## **PARKS AND LEISURE AUSTRALIA (PLA)**

### **APPROACHES TO RESEARCH**

**A DISCUSSION PAPER PREPARED FOR PLA ADVISORY**

**BY DR MAY CARTER, OCTOBER 2014**



The question of how to undertake and assimilate research into PLA operations and practice to best service members and industry stakeholders has been raised on numerous occasions. At the PLA conference held in Cairns in September 2014, this was identified as a priority issue for PLA Advisory.

#### **Past initiatives**

PLA previously published a draft Research and Development Plan for the Australian Parks and Leisure Industry 2006-2011. This plan was prepared in 2005 by the national Research and Development Subcommittee consisting of Stephen Bourke (PLA National President), Neil Power (PLA National Vice-President), Steve Mason (WA), Tony Veal (NSW) and David Aldous (VIC/TAS). This draft plan identified several key areas that needed attention:

- state of the parks and leisure industry;
- health through exercise;
- cultural advancement;
- outdoor leisure and conservation;
- effective horticultural operations and management; and
- sustainable park development.

In addition, it was recognised there was a need to provide a mechanism for effective industry communication and information flow.

It is unknown if the plan was adopted or any recommendations were enacted<sup>1</sup>.

#### **Current initiatives**

Two research initiatives are currently available to PLA members: Parks Base Knowledge Base and Research Connections.

Parks Base Knowledge Base was commenced in 2008 as an online knowledge database for professionals in the fields of public open space, urban greenery, urban ecology, conservation and protected areas, land management, arboriculture, horticulture, soils, turf, recreation and sport; and associated areas of sustainability and social research (see <http://www.parksbase.com/documents>).

Knowledge Base incorporates a wide range of material including:

- Local, state and federal government documents
  - •Plans
  - •Policies
  - •Strategies
  - •Reviews
  - •Reports
- Professional articles
- Research papers
- Academic papers

<sup>1</sup> May Carter has a hard copy of the draft plan and it is requested that PLA National Office search its archives to determine if an electronic copy exists that can be forwarded to PLA Advisory members. It was proposed that this plan would be presented at the PLA National Board meeting on 18-19 March 2005. If not found, a scanned copy can be forwarded to Penny Davidson for distribution.

- Legal materials
  - Legislation, regulations, codes
- Statutory plans
- Tribunal and judicial decisions

This resource is a collaborative program between Integrated Open Space Services and PLA. Access is managed through PLA member registration and log in. In conjunction with free access to Knowledge Base, Knowledge Research and the Parks Base Comparison Program are accessed on a fee-for-service basis.

In 2011, John Wood (PLA Queensland member) undertook a project to publish Research Connections; a joint initiative between PLA, New Zealand Recreation Association (NZRA) and the Australian and New Zealand. To date, eight editions of the newsletter have been published (see <http://www.parksleisure.com.au/resources/research-connections>). As stated in the first edition published in July 2011, the aims of this newsletter were to:

- Inform members about current research projects, particularly within Australia and New Zealand.
- Provide links to sources of information of potential interest to members.
- Facilitate information exchange between researchers and members.
- Identify member research priorities/interests.
- Identify potential research sponsors/funding sources.

More recently (as reported in the Research Connections Newsletter #08, September 2014), John Wood and Dr David Lamb presented an analysis of the 103 projects reported in the first seven issues of Research Connections at the recent PLA national conference in Cairns.

The main findings included:

- **Affiliations** - most researchers are associated with universities. Government, industry and commercial sectors are poorly represented. This may be because researchers within these organisations are bound by confidentiality and cannot share their research findings.
- **Funding sources** – tends to be spread across most sectors with private funding sources the most common (i.e. not for profit clubs and organisations). There was no information available on the relative amount of funds provided by each sector.
- **Keywords** – 560 tags were associated with the 103 research projects. These tags were grouped under 18 major headings with the most common being:
  - sport (133);
  - social (87);
  - tourism (42);
  - planning (49); and
  - health and well-being (40).

### Questions to be considered

These current initiatives provide information for PLA members but do not appear to be well-used or easily accessible. Perhaps most importantly, while they provide a mechanism for access to research materials, there is limited scope for PLA members to access overall findings or research synthesis that may enable them to incorporate information into day-to-day operations or planning processes.

The key question for PLA Advisory to consider is whether it is more important for PLA to initiate and undertake strategic research projects, particularly in key areas (such as open space planning and design, potential effects of climate change, or horticultural practice) or to develop more effective mechanisms for synthesis and dissemination of research published in academic journals and as industry reports.

To this end, the following options are presented for consideration. Potential advantages and disadvantages of each are briefly outlined.

Option	Advantage	Disadvantage
Retain Knowledge Base and improve PLA member awareness and access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Already in place and provides access to published research and reports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needs on-going input and updates</li> <li>• Current access to Knowledge Base requires users to register and sift through articles and reports to find relevant material</li> <li>• Knowledge Research and Comparison Program are fee-for-service products</li> </ul>
Retain Research Connections and expand to include research abstracts and/or synthesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Already in place and provides contact details for researchers currently undertaking projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Researchers may not be willing to divulge findings until formal publication complete</li> <li>• Research synthesis is time consuming and current project is run on a voluntary basis</li> </ul>
Form alliances with industry partners and fund strategic projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to initiate relevant PLA specific projects and determine required framework and timeline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential cost</li> <li>• Vested interest if commercial partnership</li> </ul>
Form alliances with established research institutions (i.e. universities & colleges) and fund strategic projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to initiate relevant PLA specific projects and determine required framework and timeline</li> <li>• Strong interest from tertiary sector in establishing industry partnerships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential cost</li> <li>• Vested interest in retaining intellectual property and publication rights</li> </ul>
Form alliances with established research institutions (i.e. universities & colleges) and sponsor honours and post graduate research for strategic projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to initiate relevant PLA specific projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential cost</li> <li>• Time factor (1 to 6 years depending on Honours, Masters or PhD project)</li> <li>• Uncertainty of outcome and quality</li> </ul>
Engage research associates to review published research and reports and provide synthesis in easy-to-understand language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity to provide research overview for members and links to more detailed information as required.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential cost</li> <li>• Needs to be done on on-going basis</li> <li>• Requires specialist knowledge in respective fields: PLA members cross-industry areas of interest include planning, design and management of parks and open space and community facilities; leisure and cultural enterprises; play design and practice; horticulture; and others</li> </ul>