Addressing the Negligible Usage of Parks by Ethnic Communities

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**ABSTRACT**  
Ethnic communities utilising parks and parks’ facilities are reported to be underrepresented in the population. In order to address this aspect of social inequity, using the literature, this paper aims to investigate and analyse the usage of parks by the Victorian population in Australia. The groups studied include non-native English speakers and those who do not speak English at all. This language barrier, together with their cultural differences, does provide a complex and challenging research opportunity. However, it is necessary to have a good understanding about these non-park users in terms of their perception of the quality of the product so that this can be addressed appropriately.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, social inequity, recreation, diversity, quality

**1.0 Introduction**

National parks and metro parks are generally public places, which members of the community, tourists and visitors can utilise mainly for their leisure activities. The scope of activities that parks cater for is quite extensive and ranges from athletic adventures to sedentary picnic outings. In Australia, there are different types of parks with different characteristics. For example, the Alpine National Park can offer snow-related sporting and leisure activities. Other national parks, with their flora, fauna and unique landscape are environmental heritage attractions in their own right. Therefore, parks are visitor attractions. Man made metro parks provide a local and accessible public area, which the residents of the city can visit to appreciate ‘open’ space on a special occasion (for example, to attend an event or festival) or on a regular basis especially if they are living in a small city apartment.

Despite the range of types of parks, it is well known that not everybody visits them. It is observed and reported that certain ethnic communities are underrepresented in the utilisation of these parks (Zanon, 2005; CEH, 1999). Referring to and addressing this aspect of social equity, this paper aims to explore and investigate the usage of parks by the ethnic population in the community in Victoria, Australia. These include non-native English speakers and those who do not speak English at all. The aim will be mainly to explore passive-type recreational activities, which include social type activities rather than specialised activities that are sport-related. In order to understand why some people do not frequent parks it is important to differentiate behaviour of these minority groups of people, whether it is based on the quality of the product, the lack of opportunity, or a lack of attraction, or a strong avoidance for these places. In a report from the United Kingdom, it is not unusual that park users are seen to be homogenous and so diversity is not catered for (Ravenscroft and Markwell, 2000). This is despite the recreational literature and studies focusing since the 1960’s on minority preferences and behaviour (Bowker and Leeworthy, 1998). Therefore, this research project would contribute to the initial stages of addressing the social inequity aspects of park utilisation in the Victorian community in Australia.

**2.0 Diverse Consumers and Communities**

Australian society comprises the indigenous population and migrants who have settled in and call Australia home. Since Australia has an immigration scheme that assesses and evaluates each and every immigrant, once the migrants’ applications are approved, they enter and reside in Australia. Therefore, the immigrants contribute to the increase in population in the country, as reported in the census collected over the years. The countries of origin of the migrants vary and have shifted from those
originating in Europe to those originating in Asia (ABS, 2001). It is quite common for new migrants to settle in cities, as they begin to look for jobs that are more abundant in cities than in the country. Since newer suburbs emerge at the edges of the city, the new arrivals tend to cluster as new houses are usually built in new developments. Over time, there are more people born overseas and who now reside in Australia. Predictably, much of the ethnic population tends to aggregate in different suburbs. This leads to different suburbs being linked with different ethnic groups. This typically occurs in other urban locations in Australia and also in the State of Victoria, which is referred to as the ‘garden state’. Table 1 shows the Victorian population who are born overseas and the number of people who do not speak English at all.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin (top 12)</th>
<th>Percentage population (%)</th>
<th>Country of Origin (next 12)</th>
<th>Percentage population (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>19.03</td>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>8.34</td>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>Macedonia, FYROM</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viet Nam</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>Hong Kong (SAR of China)</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China (excludes SARs and Taiwan Province)</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS (2001)

Table 2: Top two dozen country of origin of the population in Victoria not born in Australia

The approximate percentage of those born overseas is 25%, and those who do not speak English are approximately 20% of the Victorian population. If the results of previous studies on Victorian park usage are accurate, this translates into a significant number of people that do not utilise parks and their facilities. This equates to about a fifth of the population. Therefore, research exploring this issue will help address and understand why this is the case. These people come from a range of countries and from most of the continents around the world. Since the English language may not be the main language in many of these countries, it is not surprising that many immigrants do not speak English well or not at all. Although English is the official language, Australian television does broadcast a number of news reports and movies that are not in English. Therefore, it is possible not to lose the media contact and language of the original home country of the migrants. This is one of the factors that make Australia an attractive place for immigrants whose first language is not English. Table 2 shows the top two dozen countries of the population not born in Australia (derived from the 2001 census data).
Many Victorians not born in Australia have originated from the United Kingdom, Italy and Greece. From the list in Table 2, there are many residents of Victoria who have come from non-English speaking countries.

2.1 The Importance of Parks

Parks can be regarded as recreational open spaces that the general public and tourists can visit and utilise (Devlin and Booth, 1998). In Victoria, these include national parks housing a significant number of natural flora and fauna, which can cater for a variety of activities (see Table 3). Parks are reputed to play an important role in the health and wellbeing of people. Parks Victoria has a programme referred to as “Healthy Parks and Healthy People” that promote the positive health benefits associated with park use (PV, 2007). Therefore, non-park users, who are absent from park locations, will not experience the health benefits and wellbeing that other park users may enjoy. Being large masses of land, parks are managed by Parks Victoria or the Department of Sustainability and the Environment. As a visitor attraction, national parks can attract a significant number of people, whether locals or tourists. In addition to natural parks, there are other types of parks such as metro parks, amusement parks, heritage parks and playgrounds which people refer to as parks (see PV, 2007 for the full range of these facilities). This has implications when trying to study and evaluate the utilisation of national parks and the types of visitors involved in the visitation and their satisfaction levels (such as in the study below by Parks Victoria).

2.2 Types of park users

In a recent study of park users, the park visitors were segmented into seven different groups according to the distinctive differences in the park visitors’ behaviours, experiences, market preferences, service preferences and demographics (see Table 3). Face to face interviews were conducted with the respondents at thirty-four parks in Victoria (Zanon, 2005).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Market Segments</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Nature Admirers*</td>
<td>2,974</td>
<td>26.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Urban Socials*</td>
<td>2,954</td>
<td>25.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Trail Users</td>
<td>1,639</td>
<td>14.39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Passive and Other Users</td>
<td>1,075</td>
<td>9.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Activity Centric</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>8.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Access Made Easy*</td>
<td>917</td>
<td>8.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Country Vacationers</td>
<td>857</td>
<td>7.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total respondents</td>
<td>11,387</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* as likely to be non-English speaking  
Source: Zanon (2005)

Table 3: Segments and proportion of parks visitors

The ‘nature admirers’ are those visitors who seek a novel but short visit to the park. Their motivation is to enjoy the scenery and admire the plants and animals found in the parks. Hence, this group visits parks for tourism or sightseeing purposes. Most of these visitors are first time visitors who are visiting parks that are located in the country. This group of visitors is also easily pleased and satisfied with their experiences. Many of these people are visiting from overseas or from another state. This group is likely to include people from a non-English speaking background. The visitors are more likely to be born in Germany, China, Japan, Switzerland or USA/Canada. The ‘urban socials’ visit parks for social reasons such as for meals or for events. Not surprisingly, many people from this group come from Melbourne and have visited the park on previous occasions. These are usually day trippers who are likely to have a non-English speaking background and born in Croatia and Malta.

Although the two abovementioned groups are the largest groups to visit the parks, one of those groups is more likely to comprise tourists, whilst the other group would comprise mainly locals. The other five segments of visitors are not specifically or uniquely English speaking. The third group, which are ‘trail users’ are those visitors who visit the parks for a specific purpose, which is mainly for physical activity utilising the walking tracks. The next category is the ‘passive users’ who visit parks to enjoy nature and include activities such as sunbathing, painting, reading and photography. In contrast, the ‘active users’ are those who participate in the more active sporting activities such as rock climbing and snow activities. They go to the beaches for surfing and water-related activities. The ‘access made easy’ group are similar to the first group but only visit parks when adequate access facilities are available. Therefore, such facilities and structures can cater to allow improved access for the disabled and the other visitors
who prefer to visit parks with these additional facilities. The last segment is the ‘country vacationers’ who are visitors that spend the most time at country locations. Hence, they stay for one or more nights at their destination.

In summary, the first, second and sixth segments are likely to include non-English speakers. However, they are still reported to be the most under-represented group as parks’ visitors. However, researching ethnic communities is complex and it is possible that a bias in the survey could have contributed to this conclusion. In practice, when given the choice to select participants at random, it is less likely that an interviewer conducting an interview in the English language would choose to interview a non-English speaker. Even in the event of approaching a non-English speaker, the difficulty in communicating and completing the questionnaire due to language and cultural barriers could result in an incomplete questionnaire and be thus void. It is also possible that these participants would choose not to participate in a voluntary interview (in English) or treat interviews with suspicion. Therefore, further research about ethnicity and non-English speaking visitors need to be conducted separately in order to confirm or to ascertain whether this group is really underrepresented when visiting parks. For this purpose, qualitative face-to-face interviews with individuals with a compatible culturally sensitive researcher are most likely to yield the best results.

2.3 Utilisation of parks by ethnic communities
Another local study conducted in Victoria was based on the feedback from twelve focus groups comprising one hundred and seventeen participants in 1999. The ethnic groups included in this survey include those who spoke Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Greek, Indian, Italian, Spanish and Vietnamese. The questions were designed towards gathering information about their awareness of the location and types of parks, their attitudes towards parks, their usage and visitation patterns. It also aimed to obtain feedback on their information needs and to receive their recommendations towards improve the existing facilities and services in these parks (CEH, 1999). In terms of awareness, it was reported that not all participants knew the names and location of the parks unless they were living nearby or have visited the parks before. The level of awareness is also dependent on how long they have lived in Australia. It was clear that they visited parks when involved in family activities, such as picnics, entertainment of overseas visitors and when attending cultural and religious festivals. An important barrier to park usage is the concern about safety. Their normal lifestyle, presence of dogs and the distance (availability of transportation) to these areas also affected their decision not to visit parks. It was generally agreed that more information provided to them about parks would be useful. When asked to make suggestions about park facilities, programs and activities and services, the participants were happy to provide a range of recommendations. These recommendations include conducting promotional campaigns, developing linkages with key community organisations, introducing parks and related activities, developing park facilities, addressing park safety and enhancing staff awareness.

The focus groups reported that in Asia there is little distinction between a park and garden. In a European culture, it was reported that it is unacceptable for a female to leave home and go to the parks because they are expected to remain at home to cook and clean rather than join friends in a park. Also, it is usual to enjoy the home rather than the outdoors. Therefore, bushwalking is alien to some cultures especially in an unfamiliar national park environment. Generally, there was little appreciation for nature itself and their visitation to parks were often related to special events or for other specific reasons apart from recreation and relaxation. A special event or festival located in a park environment is an excellent way of encouraging diverse ethnic groups to participate in events (Zoltac, 2003). There were a few disturbing stories associated with parks originating from the focus group participants. Certain parks are the location of murders (two) and so perceived as dangerous places. Another participant reported that her grandson was greatly distressed after he had an unfortunate encounter with a pervert when using a park convenience. It is not surprising that safety is a major concern for park users. In a previous study, it was found that females rate safety as an important factor (Ho et al., 2005). With a larger number of female participants involved in these focus groups in Victoria, it is not surprising that safety is seen as an important determinant for their usage of parks.
It is easier to accommodate recommendations to provide new facilities and programs (one-off intervention) than to provide measures to ensure the safety and security (continuous intervention) of park visitors. It is even more difficult to restore the confidence of visitors who perceive parks as dangerous places based on the information that they hear from their community grapevine. However, any further facilities or efforts to cater for and consider the recommendation from the focus groups by the appropriate authorities would also benefit the wider group of park users. The difficulty in evaluating the final report from a number of focus groups is that it is not always possible to determine if the suggestion and recommendations are those of dominant individuals or that of the larger group. This is especially so when the focus groups consists of different ethnic communities because different cultural groups are likely to behave and respond differently to questions and responses. It is possible that the some group allows one individual to speak on their behalf, which means that the ‘focus’ group response is that of one opinion rather than that of the group. The group may decide to remain silent or not challenge the statements made by the individual because conflict is not regarded as polite in some societies. Hence, the results reported from the twelve focus groups may or may not be representative of the ethnic group because of cultural etiquette practiced by the group(s). Therefore, qualitative interviews are important to confirm and support the existing findings from this project. A study conducted in the United States found little difference in the expectation of the various ethnic groups from the rest of the population with regards to aspects of park usage (Gobster, 2002). It is also likely that economic differences rather than ethnic differences determine park utilisation (Tinsley and Croskeys, 2002).

2.4 Equity in the utilization of community resources
With an increasing population of immigrants arriving from non-English speaking countries each year, it would be useful to research and understand what these immigrants would like to experience in their new home environment. With a wealth of diversity of culture and language, their perceptions and opinions about parks and other open spaces would be useful feedback for determining future developments in parks. By including an ethnic component into these environments the improvements would be an asset that can promote these parks as unique visitor attractions for the local community and international tourists.

Surveying immigrant populations that experience difficulty in communicating in English or conducting interviews using a translator is not a simple task (Gobster, 2002; Henderson, 1998). In addition to language, there is culture to consider and polite protocols to follow to recruit, select and interview ethnic participants. Quite often, certain minority ethnic populations are unlikely to reveal their real thoughts and opinions to just any interviewer because, culturally, it is not appropriate to complain or criticise others. Also, there is a tendency to portray themselves as positively happy people whether this is the case or not. Cultural norms may prevent members of a focus group from correcting or contradicting another participant and so may choose not to express their opinions in this process. In other situations, the group may expect one person to speak on their behalf instead. Therefore, the interpretations of the results from ethnic research have to be carefully analysed and evaluated.

Another difficulty in researching ethnic populations is that attitudes and behaviours can change over time. Ethnic Victorians who have resided in a country for several years, through ‘selective acculturation’, may develop different opinions and preferences from those who have newly arrived in the country. This subconscious assimilation process occurs when the immigrant is continuously exposed to the new culture and environment on a daily basis. This is not a new concept because studies on the attitudes and preferences of American-born Hispanics were found to be quite different from those originating directly from Mexico (Shaull and Gramann, 1998). Therefore, in order to determine ways of improving the quality of the parks services and facilities, it is necessary to consult settled (several years) and newly arrived immigrants. The settled ethnic population would be able to provide feedback more reflective of Victoria, whilst the newly arrived immigrants could provide valuable cultural or ethnic information from overseas. This combined effort will result in an improved product that is more user-friendly to both locals and international tourists, especially for those tourists from the country or region of origin of these communities.

3.0 Conclusion
In conclusion, researching ethnic communities is not a simple process. The complexities are related to language where a poor command of the language used in the interview may lead to a distortion of the final report. There are also cultural issues where focus group responses may emanate from a dominant participant rather than that of the larger group. Nevertheless, to conduct ethnic-related research is a positive step towards recognising the diversity and residence of people from different countries. Hence, this will eventually lead to a greater understanding about the characteristics and behaviour of this group of underrepresented non-park users. By understanding the perceptions of ethnic communities on the quality of the product, this could eventually lead to opportunities that could modify any negative-perceived attitudes about parks. Thus, addressing the social equity issues with non-park users, by promoting and encouraging park visitation in the future, could lead to the continuous improvement of the existing facilities and services.

References

Authors’ Backgrounds
Dr Christine Lee [BSc(Hons) Dundee; DipAcc&Fin, DipMgtSt, MMS, PhD Waikato; GCHE Monash ANZIM] is an assistant lecturer in the Department of Management at Monash University, Australia. She currently teaches undergraduate and postgraduate subjects in management and international business. Her current research projects are mainly in the health, tourism, international business and management. She has published and presented numerous papers at domestic and international conferences in these research areas and in her teaching. At Monash University, she is member of the Tourism Research Unit (TRU), Family and Small Business Research Unit (FSB RU), International Business Research Unit (IBRU), and the Australian Centre for Research in Employment and Work (ACREW). In addition, she is also a member of the human ethics committee (SCERH) at Monash University. In the local community, she is as a member of the Latrobe Tourism Advisory Board and a member of the Gippsland Heritage Park management committee.
Dr Graeme Galloway [BA Hons Sydney Uni., PhD Sydney Uni, MAPS, Reg. Psychologist, Vic, Australia] is a lecturer in the School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia. Teaching areas include cognitive science, philosophical foundations of psychology, research methods. Research interests comprise: theoretical analysis of human cognition; psychology of humor; socially desirable response bias regarding environmental issues; tourist attitudes and behaviours (in particular, with respect to parks visitation, and wine tourism); psychographic segmentation of tourist markets. He has published in each of those areas as well as having presented papers at international research conferences and colloquia on those topics. Editorial consultancies include: Reviewer – Tourism Management; Annals of Tourism Research; Annals of Leisure Research; Environmental Management; Theory & Psychology.