Ask the locals - Urban land management driven by local perceptions of cultural benefits

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Ecosystem services describe the huge array of benefits humans gain from our natural environment. This includes everything from food and clean water, to local heritage and social wellbeing. Cultural ecosystem services are a more specific type of ecosystem service, and include the immaterial, often unnoticed benefits we gain from nature such as inspiration, spirituality, heritage, aesthetic appreciation and recreation. However, as cultural benefits are often personal and experience-based, they can be difficult to measure and consider when making landscape management decisions.

The importance of cultural services is evident in urban parks. With increasing urbanisation, more and more people rely on urban parks and green spaces to access the many benefits that nature can provide. Yet, land managers with limited resources are often constrained to biological or economic requirements, neglecting the social and cultural importance of the land.

In this study we aimed to explore new ways to measure cultural benefits in Riverside Park, an urban park in Southampton, UK. As people are integral to urban environments, we wanted to recognise how local people's opinions can drive management of an urban green space, for current and future generations. We asked 52 people to voice, in their own words, their views regarding the benefits they currently gain from the park. Using a method called a Public Participation Geographical Information System (PPGIS) we then asked them to mark the location of each benefit on a map. We then repeated the same exercise, showing each

Riverside Park, Southampton. Photo credit: Lizzie Jones.

person images of an 'alternative state', a possible future vision of the park, which included a new white-water kayaking facility and landscaping, allowing us to compare answers for the two states.

Allowing people to explain the benefits they gain from the park in their own words revealed stories, opinions and preferences in personal detail, and by sorting opinions into positive and negative ideas we were able to identify trade-offs around the park. Mapping also revealed 'hotspots' of use, indicating areas where development may cause contention between stakeholder groups. With this information, land managers will be better equipped to find the best compromise, to preserve current cultural benefits and maximise use of the green space, in Riverside Park and in other parks, for generations to come.

Word cloud, displaying the words most commonly used to describe the benefits provided by the park in its current state.

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