



Understanding the social and environmental values the community hold for Cockburn Sound

Context

Cockburn Sound (the Sound) is one of the most intensively used marine areas in Western Australia. It supports recreational activity, tourism, aquaculture, and commercial fishing and is home to the State’s major heavy industry and the Australian Navy’s HMAS Stirling Base on Garden Island. Of ecological significance, the Sound contains extensive areas of seagrass and organic-rich silts; and is a major spawning ground and nursery area for pink snapper, an important foraging area for little penguins, and a nursery and feeding area for resident Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphins (CSMC 2018). Maintenance and improvement of the natural environment is critical to sustaining and expanding environmental, social, and economic values of the Sound.

Why better understand community social and environmental values?

The Environmental Protection Act 1986 and the State Environmental (Cockburn Sound) Policy (SEP) 2015 set management criteria to preserve the Sound’s social, economic, and environmental values.

Water quality is the target against which performance is measured and reported (CSMC 2018). No defined targets for recreational and cultural values exist. Public consultation on social values of the Sound to date has been limited. Concurrently, human pressure is forecast to increase, with an estimated \$15 billion of infrastructure investment in the Sound expected over the next decade (WAMSI 2023). Good practice management requires a strong understanding of environmental, social, and economic values of an area.

Opportunities and trade-offs can then be identified and management performance evaluated. Following good-practice participatory management principles, an understanding of the community’s values and vision is vital in setting long-term direction.



Map of Cockburn Sound and surrounding areas

What approach was taken?

Interviews with community stakeholders involved in managing and caring for the Sound were undertaken to better understand its value to them and their vision for its future.

The interviews along with literature and reports, and a well-constructed values framework, informed the design of a survey sent to a representative sample of people from metropolitan Perth, and to community groups in Cockburn Sound (e.g., local government authorities and local community and recreational groups). We analysed the survey and interview data to identify priority values, management concerns and themes that best represent the communities sought after vision for the Sound in 10 years. Over 1,100 people completed the survey.

What did we find?

The waters and beaches of the Sound contribute to the wellbeing of the Perth community through access to a natural environment that provides leisure, relaxation, and a connection to nature that is not widely available in other metropolitan areas of Perth. This connection is particularly deep for those living, working, or regularly visiting the region and is spiritual (i.e., affects the spirit and soul as opposed to material or physical things) and in some cases generational.

Attributes of the Sound that most contribute to the community's wellbeing include (in order of importance):

- Access to, and the presence of, waters and beaches free of rubbish and pollutants.
- The presence of a healthy environment that supports flora and fauna.
- Knowing the Sound's natural environment is being appropriately cared for, and that it exists for other people and future generations to enjoy.
- Visual amenities, such as pleasing sunsets and seeing flora and fauna in the Sound.

"I have a traditional and spiritual connection to the waters and coast in this region. Stories, activities, and ritual revolve around access to undisturbed nature, and the Sound is one of the only places left in this region which remains even remotely as it was. For this reason, it is intensely valuable to myself, and others of my culture.

Further to this, I feel that the connection to nature provided within this region is a major reason for many to live around here, for their own reasons whether traditional, spiritual, for mental wellbeing, for space, peace and quiet of a pristine bayside community. It affects my relationship with those I call my friends, as we spend much of our time together enjoying the nature beauty the Sound offers in so many ways".

[Sound respondent # 82]

"We have recreationally used the sound for many generations within my family. We have a strong connection to the Naval Base Shacks and hold high cultural connections to the grounds. It is the last virgin land and coastal area within the mainland of the sound. My wellbeing is highly improved by fishing, boating, and use of the Mt Brown Regional Park". [Sound Respondent #18]

From a management perspective it is also useful to understand how satisfied individuals are with attributes of the Sound. Based on an understanding of importance and satisfaction, we identified the following priority areas for management (in priority order):

- Ensuring coastal/marine water and beaches are free of rubbish and pollutants.
- Maintaining a healthy environment, and appropriately caring for the natural environment.
- Preserving the Sound today and for future generations.
- Improving the visibility of First Peoples cultural history.
- Improving access to, or presence of, natural history.
- Ensuring coastal environments are free from invasive species.
- Improving safety by separating congested or conflicting activities.

Respondents acknowledged and celebrated the diverse uses and values of the Sound. Clean water, safe and protected beaches, and access to recreational facilities for fishing and foreshore recreation were key elements of respondents' vision for the future. A reduction in the presence and/or impact of industry on the environment was also voiced.

"It is interesting, you have a heavy industry presence. You've also got the defence presence. And then you've got the recreation and everybody's cohabiting. And it's quite good to see that mix. Nobody's really excluded from anything. There's a couple of little areas you can't go into, but in general, we all get to play in the same area" [Interviewee #08]

Respondents ranked the following vision statements as most aligned to their vision for its future (in priority order):

1. **Care:** Environmental stewardship informs all actions in the Sound, from environmental protection to industrial development.
2. **Pristine:** Environmental condition is not only maintained but enhanced.
3. **Relaxation:** The Sound provides an escape from day-to-day. The aesthetically pleasing landscape provides respite for locals and tourists.
4. **Recreation:** Recreational opportunities are supported and celebrated. The Sound is recognised as nature's playground.
5. **Safe:** A safe and comfortable space to undertake recreational activities.
6. **Controlled:** There are effective and enforced controls (e.g., marine zoning, environmental audits) on all activities within the Sound.
7. **Diverse:** The Sound's diversity in marine and coastal use (e.g., recreation, industry, environment) is celebrated and sustained.

Implications

To maintain the social, economic and environmental values of the Sound, the State Environmental (Cockburn Sound) Policy (2015) monitors water quality.

Our results confirm the importance of water quality to community wellbeing. However, aesthetic, cultural, and spiritual values extend beyond those related to the Sound's waters, to its beaches, foreshores, and bush reserve.

Therefore, addressing water quality alone could overlook other aspects of the Sound's natural environment that play a vital role in community wellbeing.



Cockburn Sound aerial view

Reference

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The full report will be available online soon. It is cited as:

Elrick-Barr, C. and Rogers, A. (2023). *Community values and vision for Cockburn Sound*. The University of Western Australia. 56p.

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