



Case study 20

Making the Parramatta River swimmable again

Parramatta River Catchment Group/Sydney Water

This case study showcases

How collaboration and integrated planning deliver better value for communities

Customer and community working with water businesses to define broader value

Problem

Up until the 1950s, most of the Parramatta River was swimmable and the river was the focal point of many social activities. Since then, the river's condition has deteriorated and is currently in an impaired state, with only few locations where people can still swim. With western Sydney facing strong population growth, there is a growing need for active public spaces where the community can swim and relax. At the same time, governance surrounding the Parramatta River is complex, with numerous organisations having responsibility for different aspects of the river.

Solution

The Parramatta River Catchment Group (PRCG) was formed in 2008 and comprises a group of councils, State government agencies and community groups, whose aim is to work together to improve the health of the Parramatta River catchment. Through regional collaboration, the PRCG seeks to ensure coordination of effort, optimal use of resources and greater impact on governmental policies and decisions affecting the catchment than could be achieved through each member working separately.

In 2014 the PRCG launched the Our Living River initiative, with the mission to make the Parramatta River swimmable again by 2025. To achieve this mission, the PRCG are

developing a Masterplan to map the necessary steps and milestones required to meet our objectives. The PRCG has taken a strong outcomes based approach to this complex task, driven by community needs. Through initial community consultation, it became apparent that being a 'swimmable' river meant more than just swimming, but also a desire to enjoy the social, amenity and biodiversity benefits of the river. The Masterplan therefore encompasses the many dimensions of making the river swimmable, including water quality, ecological health, swimming site activation and waterway governance. It is being heavily informed by community preferences through an extensive community research piece as well as popular campaigns to involve the community in the decision making process. For example, to inform the locations of potential swimming spots, the community were asked to vote for where they would want to swim on the river.

To further strengthen the links between ecological health and swimming in community minds. The PRCG undertook a community engagement campaign which centred on inviting the community to vote for their favourite 'flagship' or mascot species for the river. With approximately 5,000 votes received, five mascots were chosen for different river qualities, being the Southern Myotis (fishing bat), Striped Marsh Frog (riparian), Eastern Long Necked Turtle (freshwater), Bar Tailed Godwit (estuarine) and the Powerful Owl (terrestrial). These have now become the focus of the ecological health component of the Masterplan.

Focusing on the preservation of these species will have natural flow on effects to the improvement of the river at large.

Through these mascots, the PRCG aim to educate the community on how they contribute to a 'living' river system and how we can all benefit from these broader ecosystem services. It will also inform the plan for the river going forward by understanding what pressure points these mascot species have in the river and how they link back to the vision of making the river swimmable once more.

Business case

Resourcing for the development of the Parramatta River Masterplan has come through various forms of cash and in-kind funding of the PRCG. Funding for implementation will be further explored through a detailed economic analysis.

Key drivers

It was recognised early that strong community engagement would be required, given the population in the catchment and complexity of the issue. The diversity in participating organisations in the PRCG means that this was a strong vehicle to move the vision forward.

For Sydney Water, in addition to fulfilling wastewater/stormwater responsibilities, involvement strongly aligns to corporate strategy goals of playing a proactive and leadership role in the broader conversation of urban environments and considering innovative solutions.

Benefit/outcome

Amenity and recreational benefits

Ecological benefits

Relationship building with key stakeholders through the PRCG

Reputational benefits.