

Research Paper

Does the absence of community involvement underpin the demise of urban neighbourhood parks in the Eastern Cape, South Africa?

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 11 nearly (re)created neighbourhood parks were monitored for 3 years.
- There was a general deterioration in condition across most indicators.
- The decline was a result of human neglect and vandalism and livestock damage.
- Most local people lamented the deteriorating condition.
- Deterioration was rationalised because local needs and views were ignored.

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ABSTRACT

Public urban green spaces are essential for urban sustainability and the physical and mental wellbeing of urban residents. Yet in some settings they may face a number of threats, ranging from land transformation and development, through to poor maintenance and vandalism. It has been posited that community engagement is a crucial strategy in addressing or minimising many of these threats. Here we report on the condition of 11 newly created or renovated parks in poorer neighbourhoods of six towns over a three year period, along with in-depth interviews regarding the sentiments of local residents and officials to the (re)creation of the parks and their subsequent deterioration. The opportunistic monitoring showed a steady degeneration in all the parks evidenced through limited maintenance and extensive damage to or removal of trees, fencing, amenities and infrastructure, representing a significant loss of public amenity and investment. The damage was wrought by both humans and livestock. Local residents attributed the decline to several reasons, of which a lack of community engagement was prominent, including on what the site should have been used for, their official opening ceremony, and care. The parks in the best condition for the longest was the one with the most community consultation, but that too suffered extensive damage once an opening was inadvertently made through which cattle could subsequently enter. This paper emphasises that the creation and provision of urban recreational parks is only one part of the process, which alone is not sufficient to ensure their use and appreciation, but rather that the process requires deep, meaningful and respectful engagement with local communities.

1. Introduction

The provision and maintenance of green infrastructure in cities is increasingly advocated as vital in the promotion of the physical and psychological wellbeing of urban citizens and for urban sustainability. This is based on growing evidence of the positive associations between exposure to quality urban green infrastructure and an increasing inventory of social, health and economic benefits (Zhou & Rana, 2012; van den Berg et al., 2015; Shanahan et al., 2015). Moreover, the provision of

urban green infrastructure for human benefit simultaneously improves environmental and ecological systems and diversity (Livesley, McPherson, & Calapietra, 2016; du Toit et al., 2018).

Although the benefits of urban green infrastructure (UGI) are becoming more widely appreciated, many towns and cities still suffer from insufficient amounts (by various measures) and inequitable distribution of UGI (McConnachie, Shackleton, & McGregor, 2008; Shanahan, Lin, Gaston, Bush, & Fuller, 2014; Watkins & Gerrish, 2018; Venter, Shackleton, van Staden, Selomane, & Masterson, 2020). This is

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