

Waterways as social assets: Filling the gap in waterway design guidelines

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The link between exposure to nature and improved human health outcomes is well accepted by both health professionals and the community at large. Urban waterways present an opportunity to provide this exposure to nature within an urban setting, while serving multiple benefits to the community.

Even though we understand the ‘why’, those involved with urban waterway design and rehabilitation are still lacking a definitive ‘how’ to achieve these health outcomes in practice. Engineers are bound by guidelines addressing the design or rehabilitation of urban waterways for fish passage, public safety, erosion protection, flood mitigation, water quality improvement and flood safety. By comparison, very little guidance currently exists to inform social outcomes.

The paper ‘More than flooding and nutrients: a study of the mental health benefits of waterways’ (Fletcher, 2016), started the journey by presenting a range of qualitative design elements. This presentation advances a quantitative guideline, to be used in conjunction with other standards, to achieve the best overall outcomes for the community and environment.

Desirable waterway outcomes are determined based on community surveys within the greater Brisbane region and field investigations of a range of sites within South East Queensland. Waterway features that promote interaction and social benefits will be presented as a quantitative guide to lead waterway designers to better outcomes.