

Dog park interaction creates community links



It's a regular weekday afternoon at Britannia Reserve in Leederville, WA; dogs of all shapes and sizes are socialising with their canine buddies. Equally social are the dog owners.

For many it is much more than just a casual park encounter. They know each other's names, time their dog's walks to coincide, and hold a Christmas get together at the park, complete with a Kris Kringle for the dogs.

Deeper still is the social support and antidote to isolation that some regulars have experienced as a result. This was the experience of Lee Cheah, "Some days I thought I would die of loneliness and the only thing that would get me through was knowing that I could go to the park and talk to real adults that had an interest in me as a person; an interest that had started because of our mutual love of dogs. Thank goodness for the dogs, they were my ice-breakers and gave me a bond with total strangers who I soon called my friends."

For some, the social support of the fellow dog walkers has extended to helping one another out in practical ways. Britannia Reserve regular John Bettles recalls, "When I was coping with a family crisis to do with ageing parents, I was offered help to look after Dino, legal and medical advice, insights from other's similar experiences, and just generally had people prepared to listen."

The off leash area applies to only half the reserve, and dogs are required to be on leads if sporting or other events are taking place. It's a good example of the way in which an area can cater to the needs of different user groups, including dog walkers. But as John explains, there was a time when their access to the reserve as an off leash area was under threat.

"A few years ago the Council was planning to discontinue offleash access. Regular dog walkers rallied to defend it, but right from the start, we were conscious of not turning it into an 'us and them' debate."

John Bettles, Local resident



"We couched our argument around the need for resident convenience and stressed the importance of engaging the support of all residents, not just dog lovers."

As the Britannia Reserve experience highlights, off leash areas provide convenient access to residents, value to dogs and significant flow on benefits associated with people getting out and about.

The Town of Vincent also runs the Paws on the Path program which promotes dog walking and incorporates free dog training. Residents sign up for one week training with their dog and on successful completion form social walking groups.

Benefits of Local Government and dog owner partnerships

- Creates better relationships and outcomes between Council, dog owners and residents
- Provides new network and physical activity opportunities for newcomers and marginalised groups
- Encourages responsible dog ownership

Tips

- Encourage formation of a dog owners social group and provide facilities, services and assistance
- Develop a sound working relationship and work together to resolve issues and deliver positive outcomes

Web Links

Town of Vincent - www.vincent.wa.gov.au