

Are greenspaces too green? Landscape preferences and water use in urban parks*

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Abstract

With climate change, it is becoming more challenging for water-limited cities to sustain historic watering levels in urban parks, leading park managers to consider changes to park designs. However, the extent to which people value parks that deviate from conventional designs featuring primarily irrigated lawn remains uncertain. We use a choice experiment to assess public preferences for different park designs in Perth, Australia. With a scale-adjusted latent class model, we identify optimal groundcover compositions for four preference classes. We find that while having some watered grass in urban parks is important, the public are also accepting of non-irrigated alternatives. Incorporating at least 40% native vegetation groundcover can both increase the utility the public derives from parks and conserve water. Park managers also have a high degree of flexibility in designing parks that vary from the optimal groundcover composition but that still deliver near-optimal benefits to communities.

Keywords

Choice experiment, latent class analysis, native vegetation, sustainable cities, urban park design, water use

* Published as: Doll, C. A., Burton, M. P., Pannell, D. J., & Rollins, C. L. (2023). Are greenspaces too green? Landscape preferences and water use in urban parks. *Ecological Economics*, 211, 107896. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2023.107896>

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1. Introduction

Cities featuring urban parks that are dominated by lawns can be found in many regions around the world (Ignatieva & Hedblom, 2018). This landscape trend can be attributed to cultural norms shaping public expectations for the groundcover (Ignatieva et al., 2020; F. Yang et al., 2019), given beliefs that having watered grass in parks is critical to delivering social and aesthetic benefits to the public (Fam et al., 2008; Ignatieva et al., 2015; Sugiyama et al., 2008), and conventions of having lawns as the default groundcover (Gildemeister, 2002). However, while lawns in urban parks may deliver important public benefits, they often also require financial and water resources for their maintenance. This water use is of particular concern in cities with arid or semi-arid climates that experience low levels of summer rainfall and that require extensive irrigation to keep grass green year-round (Mennen et al., 2017).

Park managers in water-limited cities are beginning to explore the transition from urban parks dominated by watered grass to alternative park groundcover compositions that reduce or eliminate water inputs (Çetin et al., 2018; Sovocool et al., 2006; J. Yang & Wang, 2017). Alternative groundcovers in these cities can include native, drought-resistant vegetation or mulch (organic material typically comprised of wood chips, shredded bark, or recycled wood product materials that is typically placed around the edges of parks or around trees), both of which conserve water through reduced irrigation inputs and reduced evapotranspiration rates (Brandes et al., 2006; Wescoat, 2013). Grass can also be left without watering to go brown across dry months seasonally, or in response to specific instances of severe drought (Pitman, 2010). These alternatives to lawns have been shown to reduce water use in parks by 20-100% (Vickers, 2001) while also yielding reductions of 50% or more in park construction and annual maintenance costs (Çetin et al., 2018). Still, whether and to what extent the public would value parks that use less

water by deviating from conventional watered lawn-dominant designs remains uncertain. Here we address this uncertainty using stated preference valuation techniques.

In this study we explore public preferences for alternative park landscape designs that differ in their watering needs. We use a discrete-choice experiment (Adamowicz et al., 1998) to estimate how individuals make trade-offs between different types and levels of park groundcovers and costs. Our objective is to assess the optimal extents of different types of watered and non-watered groundcovers in urban parks in order to assist park managers in creating climate-resilient parks that benefit the public.

2. Background

2.1 Valuation and park landscape design

Stated-preference valuation methods have examined public preferences for parks in a wide range of applications, including for the establishment of new park areas (Andrews et al., 2017; Krekel et al., 2016), recovery of lost urban greenery (Lo & Jim, 2010), or avoidance of reduced park access (Henderson-Wilson et al., 2017). Regarding park design in Norway, through choice-based conjoint analysis, the area of grass and number of trees have been found to have a greater influence on people's utility than have the area of bushes, number of flower beds, presence of water features, and number of park visitors (Nordh et al., 2011). Through best-worst scaling techniques in Portugal, richness in plant species has been identified as the second most important greenspace characteristic, after cleanliness and maintenance (Madureira et al., 2018). Arnberger and Eder (2015) performed a choice experiment and compared six generalized park-design classifications in a wider assessment of factors influencing park preferences in Austria. The authors found that more manicured green spaces, which were characterized by mowed lawns,

were preferred over other classifications such as forests with dense understories and meadow landscapes. These examples of stated-preference studies demonstrate the wide scope of factors contributing to park design preferences.

Within Australia, there is a small body of literature that has specifically examined trade-offs between alternative park groundcovers and watering requirements. One early stated-preference study found that households would be willing to pay an extra \$18 annually in water costs to improve park groundcover appearances from 'brown' to 'some brown' (Blamey et al., 1999) in the Australian Capital Territory. Preferences for public open space designs in relation to groundwater use have also been considered more recently in Perth, Western Australia by van Bueren and Blamey (2019). The authors presented members of the public with a baseline scenario of a 20% reduction in the proportion of watered parks and verges, and found that the public did positively value maintaining greenness during the summer. On average, the public was willing to pay \$1.00 per person per annum to avoid a 1% reduction in the proportion of green park areas. The public was also willing to pay to convert grassed areas to native groundcover, rather than letting those spaces go brown, at \$0.87 per annum per 1% area of grass converted. Our study builds on the work of van Bueren and Blamey (2019) by expanding both the number of groundcover alternatives and the possible ranges of different groundcover options also considering tree cover. Furthermore, we model preferences for these groundcover types with a non-linear functional form to investigate threshold effects, and utilize a flexible payment scale in order to allow for the consideration of perceived positive and negative changes to park designs. Our work also builds on van Bueren and Blamey (2019) by examining how flexible park managers can be in designing parks that provide near-optimal levels of benefits to the public.

2.2 Case study area

The metropolitan region of the city of Perth in Western Australia is our case-study area. Perth has a Mediterranean climate with hot and dry summers and is also experiencing further reductions in summer rainfall levels with climate change (CSIRO & Australian Bureau of Meteorology, 2018). Water scarcity is already raising tensions between competing water resource users and causing financial stress for park and facilities managers (Glover, 2011). As the imbalance of water supplies and demands intensifies in the future, these tensions are expected to escalate.

In the state of Western Australia, 550 gigalitres (GL) per year, or 17% of urban water use, goes towards watering public parks and gardens, with a further expected increase of 250 GL per year by 2050 (Government of Western Australia Department of Water, 2016). Given these projections, governments are interested in understanding whether there are opportunities to use less water in new and existing public open spaces. The explanation of park water use and potential climate change impacts on groundwater levels that we provided to respondents is included in the *Supplementary Materials*. Shifting from watered-lawn-dominant urban parks to alternative groundcover compositions is one potential approach to water conservation.

We focus our investigation on optimal groundcover compositions in nature and recreation parks, under the classifications of local and neighbourhood parks (Government of Western Australia Department of Planning, 2015). These parks are small- to medium-sized spaces (under 5 hectares) designed to serve populations that live or work within 800 meters (5-10 minute walk) of the park (Government of Western Australia Department of Sport and Recreation, 2012). We limit our analysis to these park types as we wanted to make it clear to survey respondents that changes to the extent of turf in sporting ovals, which are typically found in district and regional

sport parks, are not being considered. This decision was made in consultation with local stakeholders, who highlighted the unique and important role that sporting parks play in community development, and that reducing the amount of sporting oval turf area is not within the scope of future park planning considerations. Furthermore, to mitigate against confounding preferences between substitute sites, our choice experiment is framed to elicit preferences for general landscape design in local and neighbourhood parks, rather than considering changes to a single park.

2.3 Survey design and data

We administered an online survey to members of the general public in the Perth metropolitan region. The survey design process followed recommendations from Johnston et al. (2017), including multiple rounds of expert and public interviews in designing the stated preference instrument. The survey includes background information about water use in parks and groundwater supplies, along with future possible park management changes. Before the choice scenarios, the survey describes the baseline park design, steps through an example choice task, and presents a “cheap talk” script (presented in the *Supplementary Materials*) to remind respondents their money is scarce and could be spent on other goods and services (Carlsson et al., 2005). The choice experiment then follows.

The choice experiment includes 60 choice sets, blocked into 10 groups of 6. Each respondent was presented with only 6 choice sets, making 6 choices. Within each randomly assigned group, the order of the 6 binary discrete-choice questions is also randomized. The experimental design uses D-optimality criteria (see Kuhfeld (2010)) with priors set to zero[‡]

[‡] We acknowledge that finding efficient designs by completing a pilot to estimate priors under D-efficiency criteria is the most common practice in the literature (Mariel et al., 2021). However, the cost of generating the graphical

(Araña et al., 2008; Hole, 2008). The experimental design was prepared using Ngene (Rose & Bliemer, n.d.). Our choice scenarios present variations in park groundcover, tree cover, and local council or rent rates, relative to a standard increase in annual council rates or rent of \$200. For context, annual council rates in the Perth metropolitan region typically range between \$1250 and \$2500, depending on the Local Government Area. This tax level and the park attributes (levels of watered grass, mulch, and tree cover) were re-centred around 0 from the baseline conditions prior to model estimation. The groundcover options are restricted to sum to 100% to account for limitations in total park extent and consider trade-offs across groundcovers. The complete set of attributes and levels are presented in Table 1. While there are four possible groundcover types, each choice scenario only displays the categories for which the percent groundcover for a particular groundcover is greater than 0. The attributes, possible levels, and baseline[§] park conditions (bolded in Table 1) were developed in consultation with park managers from councils in the case study region. To avoid potential issues with substitution effects, respondents were asked to select their preferred park landscape design generally, rather than specifying the change for one single park.

To assist the public in visualizing different park designs in the choice scenarios, we include detailed images representing the baseline and alternative scenarios in the choice experiment. Visualizations have been found to reduce choice-task complexity where the public may not be familiar with the proposed environmental changes (Bateman et al., 2009; Mokas et al., 2021), which may be the case with alternative vegetation types. There is evidence that using

images needed for each choice set meant that it was only possible to produce one set, and hence the iterative process could not be followed.

[§] We note that there is uncertainty around what constitutes the most appropriate baseline park design assumptions. Baseline conditions could involve a change in design, as was the case in van Bueren and Blamey (2019), where park managers were assumed to leave 20% of watered grass areas as non-watered grass. However, in the time that has passed since the administration of their survey, the assumed change has not occurred. Instead, we selected current practices as the baseline design, given a lack of current plans to make changes in the foreseeable future.

visualizations in choice tasks can lead to the public being more responsive (Bishop & Lange, 2005) and may lead to greater levels of respondents' confidence in stating preferences for landscape changes (Matthews et al., 2017). We commissioned a landscape architect consultant to produce 38 unique park images that captured the different combinations of environmental attributes. These images capture a street-level view of a park with various groundcover compositions in the foreground, park infrastructure including a playground, benches, and trash cans in the background, and a mix of trees scattered throughout the edges and centre of the park. They were designed using a model that ensured that the true groundcover extents were accurately represented. The images accompanied the 60 choice sets (see the *Supplementary Materials* for the full selection of images depicting the range of possible park design changes). The survey also includes a series of follow-up questions to unpack choice decisions, including questions assessing cost and attribute non-attendance (Champ et al., 2003) and consequentiality (Lloyd-Smith & Adamowicz, 2018), by informing respondents that their responses may be used to inform park landscape design. The survey concludes by collecting socio-demographic information.

Table 1

Choice experiment attributes and levels (baseline levels in bold)

Attribute	Description	Levels
Groundcover: Watered Grass	% park area with watered grass	0, 20, 40, 60, 80 , 100
Groundcover: Non-watered Grass	% park area with non-watered grass	0 , 20, 40, 60, 80, 100
Groundcover: Native Vegetation	% park area with native vegetation	0 , 20, 40, 60, 80, 100
Groundcover: Mulch	% park area with mulch	0, 20 , 40
Tree cover	Extent of tree canopy cover (%)	Low (10), Moderate (30) , High (50)
Tax	\$ increase in annual local council rate or rent	0, 50, 100, 150, 200 , 250, 300, 350, 400

The survey was tested in 12 one-hour individual phone interviews** with members of the public, where participants had completed the survey prior to the interview. A key change that resulted from the interviews related to the tax levels. The baseline council rate change was initially set to \$0 and rates could either increase or decrease relative to this level, but interviewees were sceptical of the probability of councils actually reducing their council rates. We therefore changed the baseline park scenario to align with a typical annual council rate or rent increase of \$200, and then the rate change options were deviations from this level. An example choice scenario outlining the cost and environmental attributes is presented in Figure 1. Additional context about the presentation of the council rate or rent increases is presented in the *Supplementary Materials*.

** Due to Covid-19 restrictions, conducting face-to-face focus groups was not possible.



CURRENT DESIGN	PROPOSED DESIGN
80% Watered Grass Ground cover	40% Watered Grass Ground cover
-	40% Non-watered Grass Ground cover
-	20% Native Vegetation Ground cover
20% Mulch Ground cover	-
Moderate Tree Canopy cover	High Tree Canopy Cover
\$200 INCREASE in annual council rate or rent	\$400 INCREASE in annual council rate or rent
	

Figure 1 Example choice scenario

Survey recruitment was conducted in April 2021 through a panel managed by a market research company. Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age and reside in the Perth metropolitan region (postcodes 6000-6176). We had a total of 1626 survey completions; 94 (6%) of which were identified as protest responses and removed from the analysis sample. These responses were identified based on selecting the baseline, or status quo alternative in each choice scenario and specific responses to follow-up questions that suggested protest behaviour, rather than preferences for the status-quo park design (follow-up questions are presented in the *Supplementary Materials*).

We analyse a final sample of 1532 responses, approximately representative of the Western Australian State population. The *Supplementary Materials* include a detailed

demographic breakdown of the sample and population. Summary statistics of key variables of interest are presented in Table 2, including concern over future water scarcity, which is calculated as a factor score from the correlation matrix of three questions with 5-point Likert responses. The water scarcity questions asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: *In the next 5 years, I expect that issues relating to water scarcity will negatively affect i) me/ my family; ii) people in Perth; iii) people in Australia.* The responses ranged from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). Higher factor scores indicate disagreement with the statements, while low (negative) factor scores reflect expectations that different populations will be negatively affected by water scarcity in the future.

Table 2

Summary statistics of select variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
<i>Not included in econometric models</i>		
Proportion of sample reporting using urban parks for the following purposes:		
Exercise	0.63	-
Relaxing	0.60	-
Appreciating nature	0.60	-
<i>Included in econometric models</i>		
Age (years)	47	17
Visit: visits a park at least once per month (yes=1, no=0)	0.60	-
Budget: considered budget in choice exercises (yes=1, no=0)	0.59	-
WS: future water scarcity concern	-0.01	0.92

3. Methods

3.1 Theoretical Framework

Stated-preference approaches to nonmarket valuation widely utilize questionnaires to assess the public's willingness-to-pay (WTP) for environmental quality improvements, or willingness-to-

accept (WTA) compensation for environmental quality decreases associated with policy changes or projects (Carson et al., 2001). We apply a choice-experiment format, presenting respondents with a choice between discrete policy alternatives that vary in the level of attributes, including price (Hanley et al., 1998). These methods are useful in testing new policy ideas for which there is no revealed-preference information available on past observable choices and behaviour (Burton et al., 2020). The format allows for the estimation of preferences for different attributes (Adamowicz et al., 1998), factoring in trade-offs between marginal utilities of the cost and attribute levels towards the calculation of marginal WTP and WTA values (Hanley et al., 1998).

Our model is based on random utility theory, which proposes that the level of utility associated with alternative choice options can be estimated as a factor of the characteristics of the decision-maker and the attributes of the choice options, plus some degree of randomness (McFadden, 1973). When presented with alternative policy options that differ in the levels of their attributes, it is assumed that individuals will attempt to select the option that maximizes their utility. The probability of a respondent making a choice between alternatives is based on a comparison of utility levels, which are comprised of deterministic and random components (Train, 2009).

In the context of this choice experiment, respondents are presented with a series of park design scenarios and are asked to select their preferred scenario between a baseline policy scenario and a single alternative. The baseline and alternative scenarios are composites of groundcover types, extents of tree cover, and associated council rate or rent changes. Council rates are annual taxes based on property values that are used to fund local government activities. We analyse trade-offs in choices to estimate payment values that leave respondents indifferent between accepting proposed changes in park designs.

3.2 Empirical Framework

We use choice experiment responses to estimate a utility function based on the proportion of the park that is occupied by each of the groundcover types (watered grass, non-watered grass, native vegetation, mulch) and the proportion of tree cover. We include level and squared terms for the groundcover variables and tree cover (as % cover) to account for non-constant marginal utility. To avoid issues with linear dependencies across the four groundcover types, we drop the level of mulch and estimate marginal utilities of the remaining groundcovers relative to mulch. We include the squared mulch term in order to ensure that the resulting model estimates are not dependent on the base groundcover type. Each respondent faces a choice among $J=2$ alternatives in $T=6$ choice occasions. Individual i 's utility associated with alternative j in each choice situation t is represented as:

$$U_{ijt} = \beta'_i x_{ijt} + \varepsilon_{ijt} \quad (1)$$

Where:

- β'_i is a coefficient vector of estimated parameters for price increases, price decreases and non-price attributes;
- x_{ijt} is a vector of attributes of the choice alternatives and includes an alternative specific constant; and
- ε_{ijt} is the error term that captures the unobserved factors that impact utility.

We estimate the base conditional logit model in Stata 16 (StataCorp, 2019). The probability that an individual i chooses an alternative j , conditional on β'_i is estimated through maximum likelihood estimation and is reported in Equation 2.

$$L_{ijt}(\beta'_i) = \frac{\exp(\beta'_i x_{ijt})}{\sum_{n=1}^N \exp(\beta'_i x_{ijn})} \quad (2)$$

We conduct a latent class analysis to account for individual heterogeneity in preferences (Boxall & Adamowicz, 2002). There are other ways of accounting for preference heterogeneity, for example by using a random parameter mixed logit model (Train, 2009), but we choose to focus on the latent class model because it offers insights into the potential impacts of park design changes by characterizing different groups, or classes, of respondents. In latent class models, unobserved groups of respondents are detected based on patterns of responses to the choice scenarios and classified using a probabilistic approach. This classification implies that people with similar preferences for urban park landscape design will belong to the same class. Preferences are assumed to be homogeneous within groups and may vary across groups (Heckman & Singer, 1984). Furthermore, we account for heterogeneity in the error variance using a scale-adjusted latent class model (Magidson & Vermunt, 2007), where the scale factor indicates how consistent respondents are when making selections in the discrete-choice experiment^{††} (Davis et al., 2019). The probability of individual i selecting alternative j within a choice set, given the scale factor σ , and conditional on the latent class membership c and scale class membership k , can be expressed as the following:

$$\text{Prob}(y_{it} = j | c, k) = \frac{\exp(\sigma_k \beta_c X_{ijkt})}{\sum_{n=1}^N \exp(\sigma_k \beta_c X_{inkt})} \quad (3)$$

Where:

^{††} We acknowledge the insight of Hess and Train (2017) that one cannot differentiate between scale heterogeneity and a particular form of correlation in preferences that can lead to exactly the same mathematical representation of choices, but for simplicity refer to the model as a ‘scale adjusted’ model.

- N are the options in the choice set;
- t is the choice situation;
- σ_k is the scale factor; and
- $\beta_c X_{ijkt}$ is the deterministic portion of the utility functions, with X capturing the composite attributes and β capturing class-specific marginal utilities.

For identification, the scale factor in one class is normalised to equal 1. The probability of individual i making choices across t scenarios is dependent on S_{ic} , the probability of individual i 's class membership in c out of the number of classes C , and W_{ik} , the probability of individual i 's scale class membership in k out of the number of scale classes K and is represented as Equation 4.

$$P(y_i) = \sum_{k=1}^K W_{ik} \sum_{c=1}^C S_{ic} \prod_{t=1}^T P(y_{it}|c, k) \quad (4)$$

We estimate a scale-adjusted latent class model using LatentGOLD Choice 6.0 (Vermunt, J.K., Magidson, 2021). The estimated proportions in each class S_{ic} and the response probabilities by class $P(y_{it}|c)$ are estimated through maximum likelihood estimation. We test a range of models differing by number of membership classes between 1 and 6 and number of scale classes between 1 and 2. The final model includes 4 membership classes and 2 scale classes, as selected using Bayesian Information Criteria (BIC). BIC is considered to be preferred over Akaike Information Criteria for these identification purposes (Nylund et al., 2007). Respondent age (*Age*), whether they visited local or neighbourhood parks at least once per month (*Visit*), whether they indicated concern over future water scarcity (*WS*), and whether they considered their budget (*budget*) when responding to the choice scenarios are used as the factors explaining probability

of class membership^{‡‡}. These variables were selected to capture a subset of demographics^{§§}, behaviour, awareness of environmental issues, and cost attendance.

Given the non-linearities and the zero sum considerations of the groundcover attributes in the choice design, where the level groundcovers must sum to 100%, we estimate welfare impacts for changes in park groundcover by class c using a compensating surplus approach (Hanemann, 1984). We follow this approach because WTP or WTA estimates of marginal changes are dependent on the particular levels of the attributes, due to the inclusion of squared terms in the utility function. The compensating surplus approach considers changes from the baseline groundcover scenario (U_b) to a given groundcover composition (U_m), and the estimated coefficient on tax (either increase or decrease) p , as per Equation 5. The value of U_b is based on the estimated coefficients for watered grass, watered grass squared and mulch squared, with 80% watered grass and 20% mulch, as per the baseline scenario attributes. Meanwhile, the value of U_m considers alternative combinations of watered grass, watered grass squared and mulch squared, and could additionally be comprised of the remaining groundcover attributes of non-watered grass, non-watered grass squared, native vegetation, and native vegetation squared. Given our focus on park design in relation to groundcovers, when calculating compensating surplus, we do not consider variations in the level of tree cover across the baseline and alternative scenarios.

$$CS = - \frac{U_{mc} - U_{bc}}{\beta_{pc}} \quad (5)$$

^{‡‡} We tested including whether there were children under the age of 18 in households as a class membership variable, but this variable was not found to be influential in explaining groundcover preferences.

^{§§} We did not include income as an explanatory variable in our choice model because a large proportion (15%) of our sample did not respond to the income question. Testing the income-restricted sample produced similar results.

3.3 Optimal groundcover optimization process

A necessary condition of our model setup is that the sum of level groundcovers must equal 100%. Consistent with this constraint and the quadratic functional form of our utility equation, we assess the utility-maximizing levels and combinations of groundcovers for each class using a nonlinear optimisation algorithm. After estimating our models, we solve for the utility-maximizing combination of watered grass (WG), non-watered grass (NWG), native vegetation (NV) and mulch (M) according to the following process:

$$\text{Max. } \beta_{WG}WG + \beta_{WG^2}WG^2 + \beta_{NWG}NWG + \beta_{NWG^2}NWG^2 + \beta_{NV}NV + \beta_{NV^2}NV^2 + \beta_{M^2}M^2 \quad (6)$$

Subject to:

- $WG + NWG + NV + M = 100$
- $WG, NWG, NV, M \geq 0$
- $M \leq 40$

Where:

- $\beta_{WG}, \beta_{WG^2}, \beta_{NWG}, \beta_{NWG^2}, \beta_{NV}, \beta_{NV^2}, \beta_{M^2}$ are estimated coefficients from the conditional logit and scale-adjusted latent class models

This maximization process is repeated for the parameter estimates from the conditional logit model, as well as each of the latent class estimates. We identify the groundcover mix that leads to the optimal utility for each of these cases. In addition, across the four latent class estimates, we constrain watered grass levels to be set between 0 and 100%, at 10% intervals, and solve for the remaining groundcover mix that maximizes utility.

4. Results

The results consist of four sections. First, to provide an overview of preferences on aggregate, the results of a conditional logit model are presented in Section 4.1. Section 4.2 then follows with the results of the scale-adjusted latent class analysis: first with an overview of preferences by class, then with class membership and scale parameter details. Optimization results are then presented in Section 4.3, including an exploration of utility changes with deviations from optimal groundcover compositions. Finally, welfare estimates, as compensating surplus measures, follow in Section 4.4.

4.1 Conditional logit model

The base conditional logit model results (Table 3) show that respondents are responsive to both tax increases (*Tax (+)*) and decreases (*Tax (-)*) (relative to the base increase of \$200), and that in general, respondents are more likely to prefer park designs with more watered grass and native vegetation, relative to mulch (organic materials). The tax parameter estimates for both *Tax (+)* and *Tax (-)* are negative, as expected. In the case of the presented tax decreases, the tax levels are coded as negative 50 to negative 200, therefore the estimated parameter relates to a negative decrease. The baseline tax increase is \$200, beginning in the following year, and all alternatives are either an increase, or no change from currently paid tax levels. We include separate tax parameters for *Tax (+)* as a higher than expected value and *Tax (-)* as a lower than expected value, as it is possible that people responded differently to these types of variations. Park designs with greater proportions of tree cover are also preferred over designs with lower extents of tree cover. We find there are diminishing returns associated with increasing extents of all three of the

aforementioned attributes. No strong preferences between mulch and non-watered grass are observed.

Table 3
Conditional logit model results

	Estimate	Standard Error
Status quo	0.023	0.100
Tax (+)	-0.007***	0.001
Tax (-)	-0.005***	0.001
Tree	0.085***	0.011
Tree ²	-9.92 e ⁻⁴ ***	1.75 e ⁻⁴
Watered grass	0.048***	0.007
Watered grass ²	-4.81 e ⁻⁴ ***	-3.40 e ⁻⁵
Non-watered grass	0.002	0.007
Non-watered grass ²	-7.95 e ⁻⁵ **	-3.51 e ⁻⁵
Native vegetation	0.029***	0.007
Native vegetation ²	-2.06 e ⁻⁴ ***	-3.25 e ⁻⁵
Mulch ²	-1.20 e ⁻⁴	1.67 e ⁻⁴

*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05

BIC based on log-likelihood = -5169.910

Pseudo R² = 0.1886

4.2 Scale-adjusted latent class model

The scale-adjusted latent class model results, presented in Table 4, indicate that there are different groundcover preferences across the four classes of respondents. Class 1 displays preferences for watered grass over mulch and for mulch over non-watered grass, with no distinct preferences between mulch and native vegetation. In contrast, Class 2 appears to be relatively indifferent between the four groundcover types. Class 3 prefers watered grass, non-watered grass, and native vegetation over mulch, each with decreasing marginal utility. For this class, the magnitude of the watered grass coefficient is much higher than for those of non-watered grass and native vegetation. However, the magnitude of the negative coefficient on the squared term is also larger. For the level groundcover terms, Class 4 only displays preferences for watered grass over mulch. The unexpected positive coefficient estimate on the squared native vegetation term

suggests that as the proportion of native vegetation increases, it becomes increasingly preferred over the alternative groundcovers.

Table 4

Scale-adjusted latent class model results: utility function estimates for Scale Class 1

	Class 1 <i>No WS</i>	Class 2 <i>Non-visitors</i>	Class 3 <i>Yes WS</i>	Class 4 <i>No budget</i>
Status quo	-7.163*** (2.379)	0.994 (6.689)	21.015*** (6.809)	1.525 (2.187)
Tax (+)	-0.136*** (0.036)	-0.193*** (0.057)	-0.013* (0.007)	-0.006 (0.007)
Tax (-)	-0.018** (0.008)	-0.223*** (0.076)	-0.004 (0.009)	-0.028** (0.013)
Tree	1.099*** (0.283)	0.451 (0.840)	1.531*** (0.550)	0.343*** (0.107)
Tree ²	-0.015*** (0.004)	-0.001 (0.014)	-0.019*** (0.007)	-0.001 (0.002)
Watered grass	0.274*** (0.092)	-0.025 (0.214)	2.519*** (0.756)	0.611** (0.246)
Watered grass ²	-0.002*** (0.001)	-0.006** (0.003)	-0.024*** (0.007)	-0.004*** (0.001)
Non-watered grass	-0.269* (0.161)	-0.352 (0.336)	1.338*** (0.412)	0.181 (0.149)
Non-watered grass ²	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.003* (0.002)	-0.012*** (0.004)	0.001 (0.001)
Native Vegetation	0.025 (0.088)	-0.374 (0.341)	1.510*** (0.478)	0.261 (0.169)
Native Vegetation ²	-3.0 e ⁻⁴ (2.0 e ⁻⁴)	-4.0 e ⁻⁴ (0.002)	-0.008*** (0.003)	0.003** (0.001)
Mulch ²	-3.0 e ⁻⁴ (0.002)	-0.014* (0.007)	0.004 (0.003)	0.004 (0.004)
<i>Class Size</i>	43.09%	22.23%	17.64%	17.04%

*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.10

BIC based on log-likelihood= 9516.234

Standard errors in parentheses

Yes WS= Concerned over issues related to water scarcity

Non-visitors = Stated they did not visit parks at least 1 time per month

No WS = Not concerned over issues related to water scarcity

No budget= Stated they did not consider their budget when responding to choice exercises

Outside of the groundcover attributes, our model provides estimates of preferences for tree cover. Individuals in Classes 1, 3, and 4 are statistically more likely to select designs with

higher proportions of tree cover. Because of the nonlinear relationship between utility and tree cover, with a squared continuous tree cover accounting for threshold effects, we can use the estimated utility functions for each class to derive their utility-maximizing tree-cover level. These utility-maximizing tree cover levels are 37%, 50%, 40%, and 50% for Classes 1, 2, 3 and 4, respectively. These optimizations are constrained to be less than or equal to 50% cover, as this was the maximum level presented in the choice experiment.

Different status quo effects are also observed across classes. For Class 3, the utility derived from the status quo option is higher than one would predict, given the attribute levels, implying some form of status quo bias. Meanwhile Class 1 gains higher utility simply from having changes in park designs than one might expect.

Our study design captures responsiveness to increases and decreases in tax levels. As expected, the estimated tax coefficients are negative in both cases (including for negative decreases), but the estimated coefficient on tax increases between \$50 and \$200 are only different from zero (in the sense of being statistically significant at the 5% level) for Classes 1 and 2. Tax decreases between -\$50 and -\$200 are only significant for Classes 1, 2, and 4. It is possible that some respondents did not actually believe they could avoid having their council rates increased. We only discuss compensating surplus valuation estimates in relation to tax increases for Classes 1 and 2.

Class 1 captures the largest share of the sample (43%), while Classes 2, 3, and 4 are similar in size at 22%, 18%, and 17%, respectively. Individuals who did not express concern over future water scarcity are more likely to be in Class 1, while those that stated that they considered their budget in the choice exercises are less likely to be in Class 1 (Table 5). In line with the lack of concern over future issues related to water scarcity, this class displays

preferences for watered grass groundcovers. Meanwhile, respondents who regularly visit parks are less likely to be in Class 2. Those that did not express concern over future water scarcity, and did consider their budget when making decisions are more likely to be in Class 2. While this group captures non-users, individuals in this class preferred having parks with a balance of groundcovers. Individuals who expressed concern over future water scarcity and that considered their budgets are less likely to fall under Class 3. This group prefers having some, but not too much, watered grass, and has native vegetation as their second-most preferred park groundcover. Those that considered their budget are less likely to be in Class 4, and this class displays strong preferences for watered grass in parks. Age was not found to be an important consideration in explaining class membership.

We also consider heterogeneity in the error variance or the degree of randomness in responses as part of the scale-adjusted latent class model. Class membership and scale parameter results are presented in Table 5 and show that approximately 57% of the sample belongs to Scale Class 2. Scale Class 2 has a scale factor of 0.073, while the scale factor for Scale Class 1 is normalized to be equal to 1. The larger scale factor in Scale Class 1 can be interpreted as being associated with a smaller error variance. The scale-adjusted latent class model estimates presented in Table 4 are associated with Scale Class 1. The larger error variance associated with Scale Class 2 is associated with coefficient estimates scaled to be closer to zero. The outputs presented in Tables 4 and 5 are jointly estimated in a single model, but presented in separate tables for clarity.

Table 5
Class membership and scale parameters

	Class 1	SE	Class 2	SE	Class 3	SE	Class 4	SE
<i>Preference class membership parameter estimates</i>								
Int.	0.958**	0.411	-1.435**	0.566	0.419	0.547	0	.
Age	-0.001	0.006	0.006	0.007	-0.004	0.600	0	.
Visit	-0.169	0.250	-0.707**	0.294	-0.152	0.331	0	.
WS	0.226**	0.109	0.384***	0.135	-0.203	0.155	0	.
Budget	0.327	0.206	2.677***	0.363	-0.219	0.270	0	.
<i>Preference class marginal effects</i>								
Age	-4.0 e ⁻⁴	0.001	0.001	8.0 e ⁻⁴	-7.0 e ⁻⁴	9.0 e ⁻⁴	1.0 e ⁻⁴	8.0 e ⁻⁴
Visit	0.033	0.040	-0.085***	0.028	0.012	0.036	0.039	0.034
WS	0.036**	0.018	0.042***	0.014	-0.057***	0.017	-0.022	0.015
Budget	-0.141***	0.037	0.370***	0.040	-0.132***	0.027	-0.098***	0.025
<i>Scale class estimates</i>								
	Scale Class 1		SE	Scale Class 2		SE		
Scale factor	1		.	0.073***		0.211		
<i>Probability of class membership</i>								
	Scale Class 1			Scale Class 2				
	0.427			0.573				

*** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.10

Int.= intercept

Visit= respondent visits local or neighbourhood parks at least once per month, on average

WS= concern over future water scarcity, with negative values for concern

Budget= 1 if respondents considered their budget in the choice exercises, 0 otherwise

SE= Standard error

4.3 Optimal groundcover mixes

Figure 2 displays the optimal mixes of groundcovers for each class of respondents where, in each case, the preferred proportion of watered grass (0%-62%) is less than the current conventional park design (80%). Optimal groundcover proportions are also considered from the perspective of the community as a whole. Figure 2 also shows optimal groundcover proportions using parameter estimates from the base conditional logit model from Table 3 (labelled CL). Here the

preferred proportion of watered grass (44%) is lower than current typical extents in local and neighbourhood parks***.

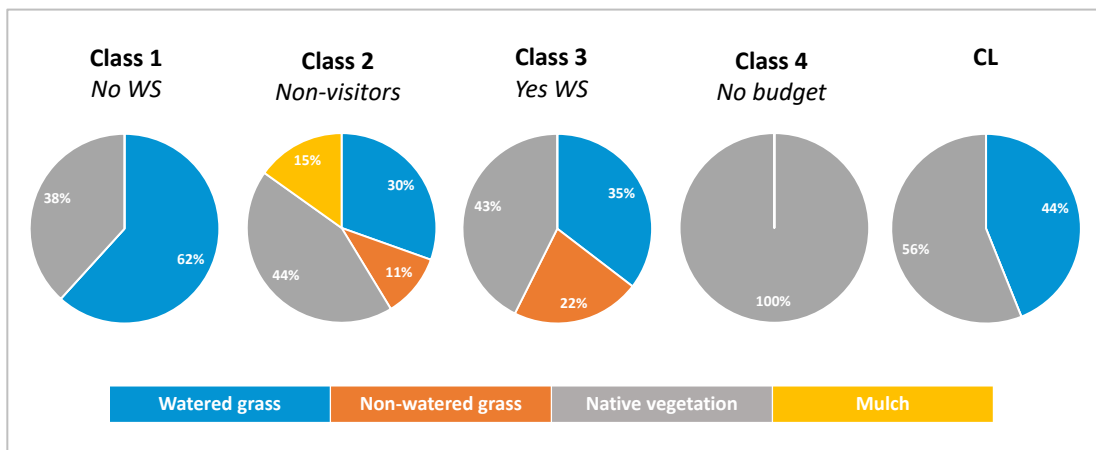


Figure 2 Utility-maximizing combination of groundcovers by class and on aggregate.

Yes WS = Concerned over issues related to water scarcity

No WS = Not concerned over issues related to water scarcity

Non-visitors = Stated they do not visit parks at least once per month

No budget = Stated they did not consider their budget when responding to choice exercises

Another way of exploring preferences for alternative park designs beyond the static utility-maximizing park composition is to vary the extent of watered grass in the park and optimize for the remaining park groundcover compositions at each constrained level of watered grass. These results, which constrain watered grass between 0% and 100% at intervals of 10% and solve for the utility-maximizing remaining groundcover mixes using the nonlinear optimization algorithm, are presented in Figures 3-6. We observe different optimal groundcover combinations for each class and at each level of constrained watered grass proportions because

*** To further explore preferred groundcover mixes for the sample as a whole, we repeat the optimization exercise using estimates from a random parameter model. The optimal mix is the same as the conditional logit model: 44% watered grass and 56% native vegetation. Model estimates are presented in the *Supplementary Materials*.

we are re-calculating the utility-maximizing groundcover combination at each step along the curve. For Class 1 (Figure 3), combinations of native vegetation and mulch are included alongside the constrained area of watered grass. For Class 2 (Figure 4), there is an accompanying mix of native vegetation, mulch, and non-watered grass in the remainder of the park area that is not occupied by watered grass. Class 3 (Figure 5) displays native vegetation and non-watered grass at different constrained levels of watered grass. Finally, for Class 4 (Figure 6) utility declines with each additional 10% portion of watered grass in the constrained optimization, as the optimal groundcover was 100% native vegetation.

Figures 3-5 are relatively flat in the vicinity of the peak of the curves, which implies that park managers have some flexibility; there is a wide range of park designs that provide utility close to the maximum. For example, for Class 1, alternative groundcover combinations that yield utility levels within 10% of the maximum utility lie between 50% and 80% watered grass. For Class 2, the groundcover combinations yielding utility within 10% of the maximum range lie between 10% and 50% watered grass. Similarly, for Class 3, this range is between 20% and 50% watered grass. Class 4 has a more narrow range of between 0% and 10% of watered grass to achieve within 10% of the maximum utility level. The remaining groundcover types outside of watered grass at these levels are different across groups, but have a common trend of at least 20% native vegetation as part of the remaining constituent groundcovers, where the constrained levels of watered grass allows.

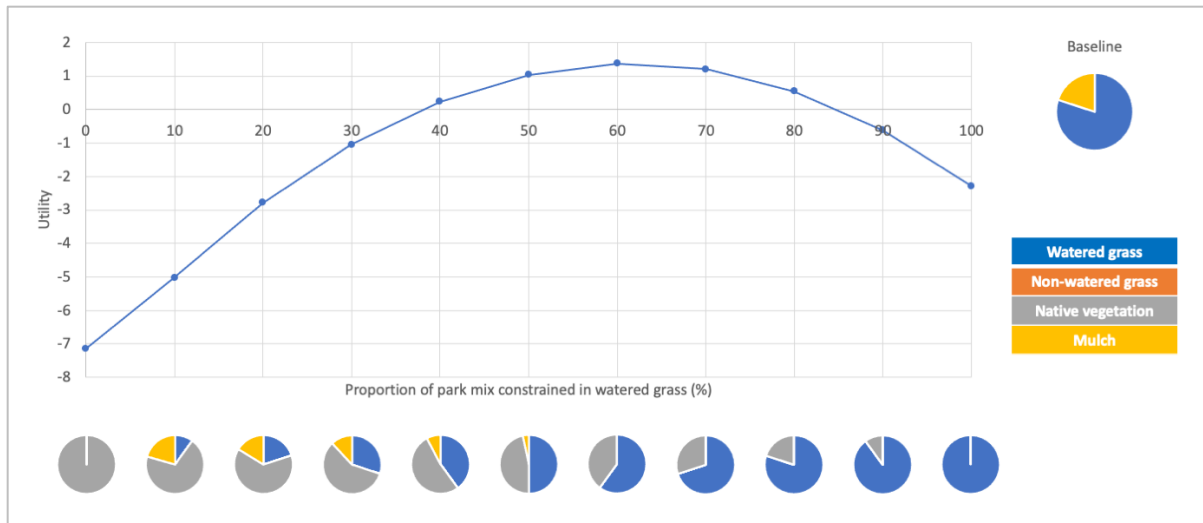


Figure 3 Exploring Class 1 utility levels for optimal groundcover compositions, relative to the baseline scenario, given constrained watered grass levels

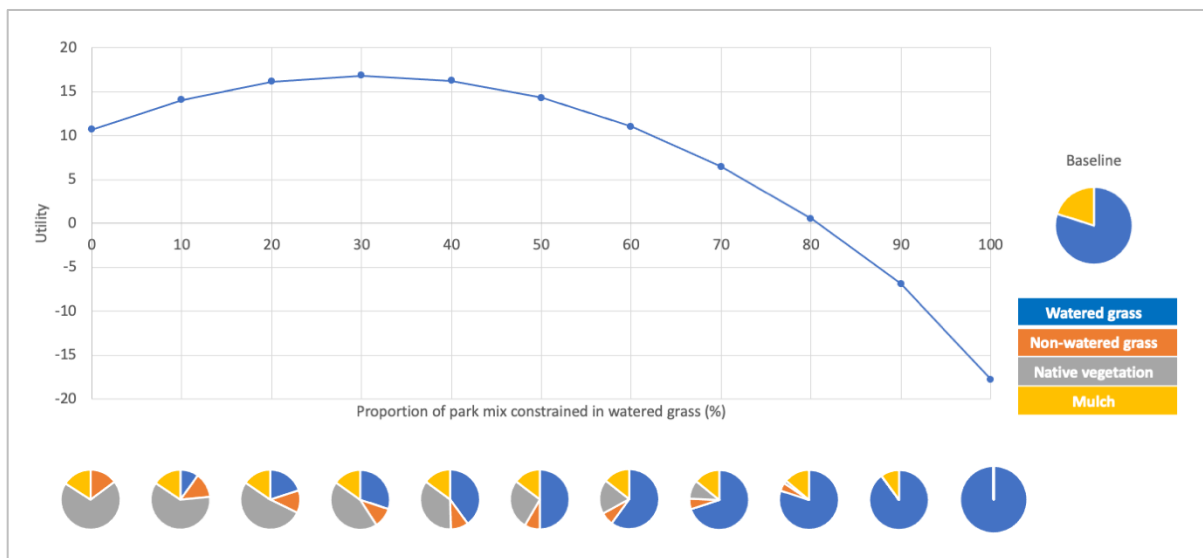


Figure 4 Exploring Class 2 utility levels for optimal groundcover compositions, relative to the baseline scenario, given constrained watered grass levels

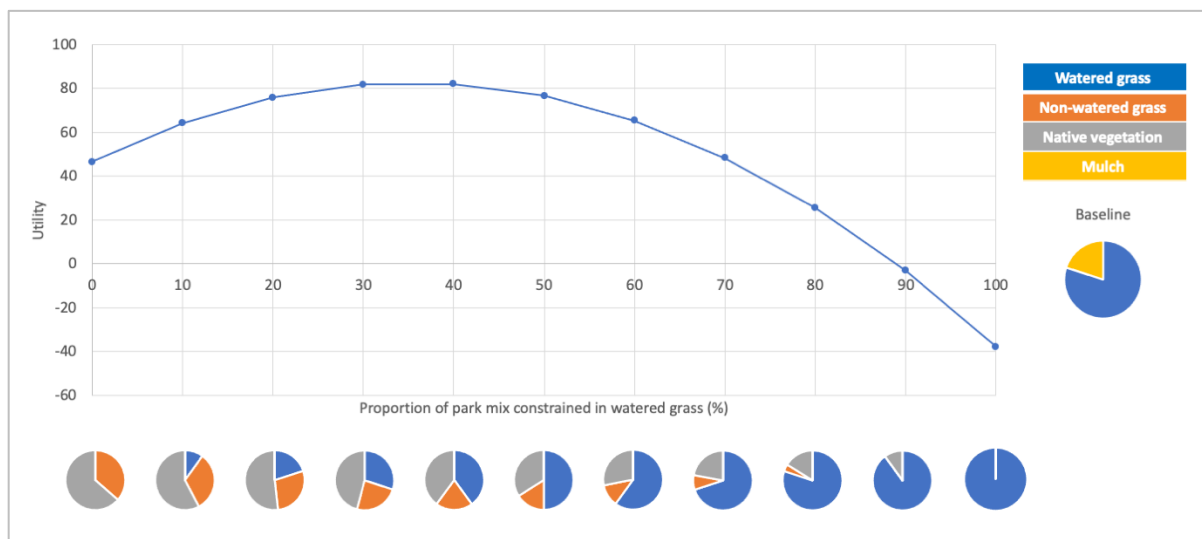


Figure 5 Exploring Class 3 utility levels for optimal groundcover compositions, relative to the baseline scenario, given constrained watered grass levels

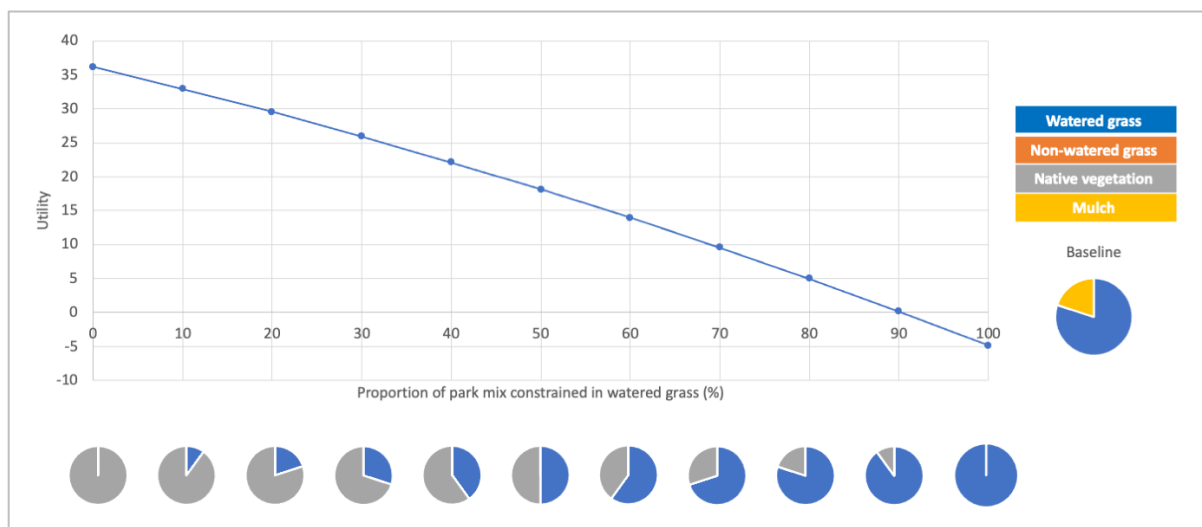


Figure 6 Exploring Class 4 utility levels for optimal groundcover compositions, relative to the baseline scenario, given constrained watered grass levels

4.4 Compensating surplus estimates

Estimating monetary values associated with changes between different park groundcover compositions requires the consideration that our functional form includes both level and squared

groundcovers, and that level groundcovers must sum to 100%. We therefore explore WTP values (as \$AUD/ household/ year) using a compensating surplus approach. The compensating surplus measure represents the payment level required to compensate for a change in utility between two alternative park groundcover states. Compensating surplus is estimated for a bundle of park attributes, namely the utility-maximizing combinations of groundcovers depicted for the four latent classes in Figure 2 relative to the baseline scenario of 80% watered grass and 20% mulch^{†††}. Table 6 summarizes these WTP values for Classes 1 and 2 only. The estimated values are \$47.24 for Class 1 and \$87.18 for Class 2. We do not present WTP values for Classes 3 and 4, given that their price increase coefficient estimates were not statistically different from 0 at the 5% level, so we cannot reliably identify their WTP. As an additional point of comparison, we consider compensating surplus estimates for changes from the baseline park to the optimal groundcover mix derived from the aggregate conditional logit mode. Here the estimated WTP is higher, because it includes the entire sample (i.e. including portions of the sample that were captured by Class 3 and Class 4 in the scale-adjusted latent class analysis, including those that indicated they did not consider their budgets in the choice experiment, and for whom coefficient estimates on tax increases or decreases were not different from 0, in terms of statistical significance), and is estimated to be \$213.59. Differences in WTP estimates reflect differences in the subset of the sample included in the calculation, the marginal utility of money, and differences between optimal and baseline groundcover configurations.

^{†††} Compensating surplus values are interpreted as a respondent's WTP for changes to general local and neighbourhood park designs.

Table 6

Compensating surplus (\$/household/year) for a change from the baseline conventional local and neighbourhood park groundcover composition of 80% watered grass and 20% mulch, to the optimal groundcover combination.

	Class 1	Class 2	Conditional Logit
Groundcover	Optimal proportion of park		
Watered grass	62%	30%	44%
Non-watered grass	0%	11%	0%
Native vegetation	38%	44%	56%
Mulch	0%	15%	0%
WTP for optimal composition, relative to baseline	\$47.24	\$87.18	\$213.59

5. Discussion

We find that optimal park groundcover compositions based on perceived utility vary by class, and include a mix of watered grass, native vegetation, non-watered grass, and mulch. For each of our identified classes, the optimal composition differs from the baseline design (reflecting current common practice). Native vegetation does not appear in the baseline park design scenario, but appears in the optimal park compositions at 38%, 44%, 43%, and 100% for Classes 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively. Meanwhile, the optimal extent of watered grass across the four classes ranges between 0% and 62%, representing an 18% to 80% percentage point decrease in watered grass groundcover, relative to the baseline. While we observe general trends indicating preferences for some watered grass and native vegetation in park designs, heterogeneity in the optimal groundcover composition across classes also reveals some conflicts in preferences, as no single design will be optimal for all groups.

In addition to estimating the utility-maximizing groundcover combinations, we explore how deviations from optimal groundcover compositions impact resulting utility levels, when compared to the utility derived from the baseline park design. The resulting ranges of utility levels offers more information to land managers than reports of marginal changes. The ranges

are relatively flat about the optimum, indicating that park managers can be flexible in establishing park groundcovers that differ from the optimal compositions with minimal loss of utility.

To explore park designs that could maximize the welfare of communities as a whole, we consider optimal park groundcover compositions for the sample in aggregate using the results of the base conditional logit model. Results show that the optimal groundcover mix includes 44% watered grass and 56% native vegetation. These results suggest that local and neighbourhood park design guidelines should continue including some watered grass groundcover, but that parks could potentially be improved by including a substantial proportion (i.e. 38% or greater) of native, drought-resistant vegetation that, once established, does not need watering. This recommendation aligns with planning directions to better manage water supplies while supporting a liveable green city (Department of Water and Environmental Regulation (DWER), 2019), and to include alternatives to watered grass in urban parks that are not designed for sport (Government of Western Australia Department of Planning, 2015).

There are several potential explanations for the observed dominance of watered grass and native vegetation in the optimal park groundcover compositions. Watered grass serves a function for certain activities such as exercise, a park function which 63% of our sample reported engaging in. Park exercising either may not be possible with alternative groundcover types, for example with native vegetation gardens that are not traversable, or potentially less appealing, as may be the case with non-watered grass with different sensory characteristics. Preferences for substantial proportions of native vegetation groundcover in parks could be linked to the 60% of our sample who use urban parks for relaxing and the 60% of our sample that use parks to appreciate nature. Studies have found that more wild or natural landscapes lead to more

psychological restoration (Peschardt & Stigsdotter, 2013). Furthermore, native vegetation is more likely to provide biodiversity benefits and habitats to facilitate wildlife viewing (Francis et al., 2012; Ives et al., 2017; McDonald et al., 2016), and increased species diversity has been associated with higher levels of life satisfaction (Methorst et al., 2020). Water conservation concerns may also be associated with preferences for native vegetation and other low-or no-irrigated groundcovers, relevant to the 57% of respondents who indicated that in the next five years they expected themselves or their family would be negatively impacted by issues related to water scarcity.

In addition to presenting utility-maximizing park groundcover compositions, we estimate compensating surplus values. These values are estimated as changes in utility relative to the baseline park design with 80% watered grass with 20% mulch. Our compensating surplus values range between \$47.24 and \$213.59 per household per year for the changes in groundcover bundles from the baseline to the class or model-specific optimal compositions. These estimates are higher than those reported by van Bueren and Blamey (2019), whose results for a 20% conversion of watered park areas to native vegetation yielded a household WTP of \$17.40. However, our WTP estimates capture proposed park design changes for greater proportions of park landscape design changes, including introducing up to 56% native vegetation groundcover in park designs. Across households within a community, these figures suggest that public welfare could be substantially increased by changing park groundcovers. But these figures only tell one side of the story, as we have not incorporated differences in costs associated with park establishment and maintenance with different proportions of groundcovers. Such an analysis would require highly detailed costing information and is an area for future research.

A limitation of our analysis is that we only consider local or neighbourhood parks and do not account for potential substitutes and complements across larger parks with potentially different groundcover compositions in the same area. This could be important as individuals may express preferences for local neighbourhood parks to have high proportions of native vegetation knowing that they are also located close to a district or regional park with having mostly watered grass groundcover. Understanding the full set of trade-offs between urban park groundcovers would require spatial optimizations that consider the systems of parks available to the public, and their characteristics, with associated travel costs. Furthermore, our analysis did not include other factors relevant to park preferences such as facilities, amenities, and general quality and maintenance. Future work could optimize urban park offerings based both on groundcover and these additional park attributes.

Where areas of watered grass may be replaced with native vegetation (either in an existing or new park) it is important to consider how much water, and over what time period, these plants require during establishment. Likewise, a full understanding of the watering requirements for watered grass establishment and maintenance would need to be considered. If park groundcovers were to change to include less watered grass, it will also be important that irrigation systems are operating effectively to ensure that only the intended park areas are watered. Better accounting for differences in watering needs and irrigation best practices could also contribute to a full benefit cost analysis of alternative park landscape designs. Such an analysis could also be expanded into a wider optimization model that considers potential changes to wildfire risk and urban heat effects associated with alternative park designs (Broadbent et al., 2019; J. Yang & Wang, 2017).

6. Conclusion

Here we find that park greenness is important, but less green than current practices is green enough. The optimal extents of watered grass in urban parks differ according to preference class and range between 0% and 62%. Meanwhile, on aggregate, having 44% watered grass and 56% native vegetation groundcover in parks is optimal for communities. Based on this analysis of the benefit side alone, we recommend that future urban local and neighbourhood park design policies promote parks with no more than 60% watered grass and at least 40% native vegetation. Our finding that councils may be able to conserve water while also increasing public welfare by re-defining park design norms to include substantially less watered grass is promising in planning for sustainable cities as both the public and the environment could benefit from the same management changes.

By exploring ranges of utilities associated with changing groundcovers from the baseline mix to alternative combinations, we find that park managers do not need to deliver parks with the exact utility-maximizing groundcover breakdowns in order to provide value to the public. This flexibility allows planners and park managers a wide margin of error in decision-making (Pannell, 2006). If councils are prioritizing water conservation, given the flatness of the compensating surplus curves, it may be possible to further conserve water by reducing watered grass even more beyond the optimal extents, at little utility cost to the public.

Designing urban parks with more diverse groundcover compositions that differ in their watering needs is just one aspect of sustainable public open space management practices and water-sensitive urban design in water-limited cities. Other approaches to sustainable water management in urban parks include adhering to water budgets, using efficient irrigation systems, and applying soil amendments (Lee & Fisher, 2016), along with using treated wastewater for irrigation (Wescoat, 2013), using native warm-weather grasses for turf (Nouri et al., 2013), and hydrozoning, the practice of grouping plants with similar water requirements together to reduce water waste (Brandes et al., 2006). Together these approaches can help conserve water under increased exposure to water scarcity, so that water-limited cities can enhance their climate resilience while continuing to provide urban parks that benefit the public.

Funding acknowledgement

This article draws on research supported by the Forrest Research Foundation, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Government of Western Australia Department of Water and Environmental Regulation.

Documentation for research involving human subjects:

Approval to conduct this research has been provided by the University of Western Australia, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures (UWA Human Ethics Reference #: 2020/ET000032).

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