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AWARD WINNING YARDSTICK GETS A “NEW RULER”

Introduction

The Yardstick benchmarking project has been undergoing some exciting changes and new developments in 2005.

The NZ Recreation Association is now responsible for the management of the project, having taken this over from the NZ National Asset Management Steering group (NAMS).

Membership in Australia was established in 2004 and plans are currently being developed in partnership with an Australian industry representative group to develop the membership throughout Australia, so that they can take full advantage of the benefits of the project.

New projects under development this year in New Zealand for the wider industry include “Park Check” and Yardstick for Pools and the second year of the Parks Best Practice Tour.

Park Check is a nationwide parks user survey project that collects information from park users to measure satisfaction and other user analysis on a comparative basis.

The Parks Best Practice Tours have also been a result of a desire to strive for best practice through information sharing. The inaugural tour in 2004 covered the lower South Island and in 2005 heads towards the Central and Eastern Coast of the North Island.

Yardstick for Pools is being developed in a similar way to Yardstick for Parks where it aims to develop best practice for aquatic facilities through the collection and comparison of asset information, service levels and management practices.

Benefits of Yardstick

Yardstick is a benchmarking project developed by the parks industry, for the parks industry, focused on parks and recreation activities. It collects and compares a range of information relating to the provision of services, cost of service provision, asset management processes and planning and policy information.

The development of an asset management approach to the long term operation and maintenance of assets has resulted in Councils needing to develop a new set of practices. These include the need to identify detailed information about their assets, services and costs and to plan for the future management and replacement of those assets and services.

Yardstick is designed to promote ‘best practice’ for the management of parks and recreation. It does this through a set of questions on specific parks operation categories. Over the last three years these have included the following:

Policy and planning	Cemeteries & crematoria	Aquatic structures
Playgrounds	Walkways	Furniture
Grass maintenance	Toilets	Signs

Garden maintenance	Trees	Carparks and Roads
Service providers	Asset management planning	Sportsfield Services

Yardstick guides organisations to achieve best practise by:

- determining if the organisation has the asset information to actually be able to answer the question. For those that cannot – it has the benefit of guiding them as to the type of information that needs to be collected, and can also assist in resource allocation to enable staff to collect the information in the future.
- determining what practises organisations are applying in managing the assets. By comparison across the industry, this helps managers to determine what they should or should not be doing, to obtain resources or to prioritise their resources so they can do what the majority of the industry is doing.
- comparing Levels of Services in terms of asset / service provision and level of expenditure. This enables managers to determine if they are providing a comparable level of service to other similar sized/located organisations.

NZRA Governance

The NZ Recreation Association, always a supporter of the project, is now responsible for the governance of the Yardstick project. It has taken this role on from the National Asset Management Steering Group who helped establish the project four years ago and who still remain highly supportive.

NZRA are keen to see the benefits of Yardstick expanded into other recreation areas, particularly the pools sector. The NZRA is also supportive of expanding the Yardstick membership into Australia where it believes it will have reciprocal benefits to NZ members and strengthen our ties and ability to learn from each other.

To ensure effective management of Yardstick, NZRA has established a separate “Yardstick Board” which provides overall governance and leadership. The members of the Board are Paul Wilson, Queenstown Lakes District Council; Garry Page, Rotorua District Council, John Latimer, CLMNZ, Brendon Ward (Chair) NZRA Executive Director; and Chris Rutherford (ex officio) Prophet IAM Ltd.

The original steering group will continue under the new title of “NZ Parks Technical Group” with a focus on guiding and developing the survey questions and other operational aspects of Yardstick Parks. The members of the NZ Parks Technical Group are Garry Page (Chair), Lisa Wheeler, Dunedin City Council, Bill Steans; Timaru District Council; Ross Webster, Manukau City Council; Brian Dobbie, Dept. of Conservation; John De Luca; Matamata-Piako District Council; Charles Foulds, Palmerston North City Council; Gordon Bailey; Queenstown Lakes District Council; and Eddie Wullems; Hamilton City Council.

Yardstick Australia

To date there are eight Australian members. Six organisations are based in South Australia (Onkaparinga, Tea Tree Gully, Victor Harbour, Salisbury, Adelaide, Charles Sturt cities), plus Melbourne City Council and Canberra Urban Parks.

These members will shortly have the opportunity to form their own Australian Technical Group, so that specific questions or possibly a whole question category specific to the Australian parks industry can be developed. Plans are currently being developed to form a partnership with an Australian Local Government industry organisation to promote Yardstick membership throughout Australia.

A significant strength of the project is that it is owned by the industry, so as Australian membership grows they will be able to determine how they want the project to be developed and delivered in Australia to suit Australia's particular needs.

A further workshop, in cooperation with the South Australian branch of the PLA as part of the "six pack" series is to be hosted in July. The additional benefit of Yardstick is the opportunity it provides to create a network where information can be shared and levels of service reviewed.

Yardstick for Pools

A new initiative being developed in NZ is a Yardstick for Pools. This will be based on a similar format to the Parks Yardstick, designed to help develop best practice for aquatic facilities through the collection and comparison of asset information, service levels and management practices.

A Technical Group of pool managers has been established to determine how the programme will operate. Issues for consideration include:

- Individual pool membership versus whole organisation
- Categorisation of pools by scale or other measure
- Identify purpose/type of information to be collected and question categories
- Survey timeframe
- Membership fee structure

It is planned that membership for the project will be advertised later this year and assuming there is sufficient interest, the project will be up and running from 2006.

The pools yardstick will enable straight forward comparisons of operational practices, user costs and asset management planning to be benchmarked across the membership. The project will give the opportunity for pools run by Trusts, Councils or via management contracts to participate together.

PARK CHECK ✓

The Park Check project is another new project being developed this year. Its aim is to provide a sustainable nationwide parks user survey project that collects information from park users to measure satisfaction and other user analysis on a comparative basis.

There is now a strong requirement for NZ Councils to measure their performance against their stated community outcomes and other specific performance targets. A key component of providing a parks service is the satisfaction of the users of the parks. Yardstick for Parks provides excellent data with which to measure performance on a quantitative basis, however it has always been a challenge for park managers to collect qualitative data on an ongoing basis in a simple reliable and repeatable way.

Park Check is intended to be a method where park managers can, with a minimum effort and low cost, purchase a ready made survey where user information can be collected relatively easily, the results analysed and a report produced, to satisfy the "quality" requirements of their performance measures.

Compared to individual surveys Park Check has the added advantage of being able to compare results across the industry. While this type of information and comparison may make some managers nervous, the information obtained from a "below average" result is an invaluable way to address the cause of this result, whether it is should be a result of poor contractor performance, lower service levels or level of funding.

The methodology includes the development of a standard survey questionnaire by a group of park managers assisted by a specialist customer survey consultant. This questionnaire will then be supplied to members, who will arrange for customers to be surveyed on site. A range of different types of reserves will be surveyed to provide a representative sample over a range of park types. The completed questionnaires will then be returned to be processed centrally and individual and a combined report produced.

Park Check will be available for the summer of 2005/06.

Parks Best Practice Tour

For many the need for professional development leads to a worthwhile national conference such as PLA or NZRA conference; however an alternative or complimentary option may be the parks tour which is designed for park managers and is hosted at each location by local parks managers sharing experiences, issues and solutions. Site visits are carefully selected to incorporate NZRA award winning parks projects and other leading edge issues.

Information on tours available from www.prophetiam.com

Some Facts about Yardstick

Yardstick is a self funding project relying on a subscription from members to cover the cost of the project. Membership fees vary depending on the population size of the authority.

The New Zealand Recreation Association awarded the Yardstick project the "Outstanding Research/Planning Award" for 2003 "to recognise significant research/planning of value to the parks and recreation industry".

Results for Yardstick Parks are compiled in an annual report supplied to members. The results are presented in order of population size, and each member's results are identified by organisation. This means you are able to compare your results with other organisations of a similar size or similar situation.

The Yardstick project is operated by Prophet IAM Ltd. under contract to the NZ Recreation Association.

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