

Selling swimmability to spark urban river clean ups

Our Living River is an initiative of the Parramatta River Catchment Group to make the Parramatta River swimmable again by 2025

Poppy Johnston | 4 December 2018



Not all rivers are suitable for swimming – there are sharks and other flesh eating animals to contend with in some places – but the benefits of a healthy river range much further with improvements to the ecology, heat island effect and recreational opportunities. And at Sydney’s Parramatta River the promise of great swimming spots are being used “shamelessly” to lure local support.

According to chair of the Parramatta River Catchment Group Councillor Mark Drury making the Sydney’s Parramatta river

swimmable is a “shameless” strategic move to “capture people’s imaginations and their hearts and their passions” for improving the health of the river.

And it’s working, he says. Drury told *The Fifth Estate* the catchment group, consisting of local councils, state agencies and community representatives, released the draft Parramatta River Masterplan back in October with the tagline “let’s make Parramatta River swimmable again by 2025.”

Plans to create three new swimmable spots by 2025 in Bayview Park in Concord, McIlwaine Park at Rhodes East and Putney Park have attracted widespread attention.

“There are all sorts of comments coming through. Everything from grandmas saying that ‘I wish my grandkids could swim in the river like I used to be able to’ to the more technical submissions,” Drury says.

A growing residential population in the suburbs surrounding the river – with four per cent of Australia’s population living in the catchment area – is also drumming up interest in the health of the river, the plans state.

The living river movement is catching on

Cities around the world are starting to breathe life back into their rivers. And because a river that is safe to swim in is also ecologically healthy, clean up efforts are often focused on swimmability.

The Charles River in Boston is now considered one of the healthiest urban river in the United States. In the past five years, it has twice earned an “A-” for bacterial water quality in the river, deeming it safe enough to swim in.

Although closed to swimmers due to pollution and water safety risks in the 1950s, a combination of state and federal government initiatives – namely to stop pumping sewerage into it – led to the gradual improvement in the Charles River’s health.

Even for urban rivers with poor water quality and pollution issues, swimming is not completely off the cards. In New York City, for example, a cross-shaped floating pool called the “+Pool” has been proposed that will effectively function like a “giant strainer” in the river – filtering river water of contaminants, bacteria and odours.

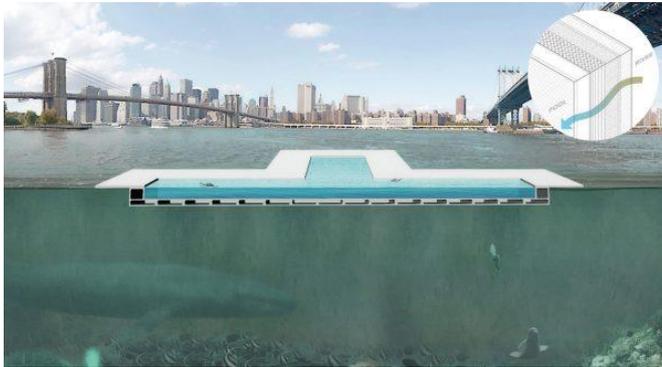
The +Pool will be broken into four sections for different purposes – a kid’s pool, sports pool, lap pool and lounge pool.

The pool is being funded through a Kickstarter campaign, and has raised over \$350,000 in crowd-funding from citizens, residents and businesses of New York.

The River Thames in London is also tapping into the power of crowdfunding for it’s own freshwater swimming pool. The purpose of the Thames Baths floating pontoon is to “re-establish an intimate and playful link between Londoners and this historic lifeblood of the city,” according to the website.

There's also some interesting international examples of urban river revival that look beyond swimming. In Chicago, for example, work has commenced on the "Wild Mile" in the Chicago River what is believed to be the biggest floating eco-park in the world.

Once complete in 2020, the park will provide a habitat for wildlife as well as function as a public park and botanical museum that is accessible by kayak.



New York's answer to swimmable rivers. Renderings by Family, Courtesy + POOL

Swimmability is an admirable goal but expectations need to be managed carefully

Back in Australia, national leader of water modelling at Alluvium Consulting, Tony Weber, has been involved in a number of projects across the country to improve the health of urban rivers. When it comes to making them swimmable, he says it's important to manage the expectations of the community carefully.

For example, he says there's always going to be times where the water quality won't be good enough to allow swimming, such as after heavy rains.

Then there's an accessibility aspect. Mr Weber says you need spots where the gradient is going down into the water gently, and is not full of mud. "Then there's other risks like obstructions below the surface."

There's also the problem of sharks and crocodiles, depending on the city.

"You wouldn't want to swim in the Brisbane River because it is full of bull sharks, or in Cairns because you get taken by a crocodile."

For these reasons, access to swimmable spots will always need to be controlled, with dedicated swimming pools or closed off areas.

Councils have already started to recognise the value of this kind of infrastructure, such as Lake Parramatta in Sydney.

"Lake Parramatta is a wonderful example of the importance of restoring our natural swimming spots," City of Parramatta Lord Mayor Councillor Andrew Wilson told *The Fifth Estate*.

"The Lake officially reopened for swimming four years ago after a significant investment and many hours of work by Council, the Parramatta River Catchment Group and local Bushcare groups.

"Since then it has become a favourite recreation spot and the ideal place for locals to go to escape the soaring summer temperatures," he says.

People are looking to escape the heat

Nostalgia and a bigger residential population is not the only reason people are excited about swimming in the Parramatta River. Sydney's western suburbs experience the city's most extreme temperatures, largely because of the Urban Heat Island Effect. These areas also miss out on coastal breezes.

See our story [How to cool down Western Sydney and reduce heat related deaths](#)

And it's only going to get hotter according to the HeatWatch – Western Sydney report from The Australia Institute released last Thursday. This report showed that the number of extreme hot days over 35 degrees – the temperature that sweating effectiveness starts to drop off – will increase to as many as 24 days a year if the world fails to transition to a low emissions economy soon. The region is currently experiencing 11 days on average above 35 degrees.

Drury says the promise of a closer swimming spot to escape the heat is also contributing to the community's excitement about the river masterplan.

“Our research shows that people are happy to travel for about 30 minutes for a swim. And for many people in Sydney that means you can't get to the beach,” he says.

A healthy river will also directly help cool surrounding areas, suspects University of Western Sydney senior lecturer of natural science Ian Wright.

A clean and well-functioning river ecosystem with mangroves and other vegetation on the riverbanks provides shade to keep the river water temperature down, he says. Despite the absence of formal research and data on this phenomenon, he suspects this keeps the temperatures down in the areas around the river due to the cooler breezes lifting off the water.

The shading over the river also protects fish and other marine life on extreme hot days. And hot days put fish in danger because there is less oxygen in warm water.

“Anyone who has fish knows you need to change the temperature they are in gradually,” Wright says.

It's not all that easy to make the river swimmable

Making the Parramatta River swimmable is not without its challenges. Mark Drury says there's already been a lot of work done to clean up the river before now. It began back in the 70s when “people started to become more conscious about what goes into the river and what the effects are.”

That's about when regulations tightened up to stop industrial run off making its way into the river.

However, there are still traces of these chemicals leftover in the water, which is one of the challenges facing water quality. There's also stormwater runoff and sewerage overflows to contend with, as well as dog poo left on the streets and swept into drainage systems, which is a largely overlooked cause of water contamination.

It also doesn't help that there are multiple government agencies and councils that hold responsibility for the river in some way. Wright says this is the biggest hurdle, and is thrilled a collective focus has been achieved. “I love how they got them all working together.”

Work is being done to reduce the impact of water quality concerns, and is expected to ramp up when the final masterplan is approved.

Stormwater run-off is a big one, and it requires a catchment-wide approach to through water sensitive design, which absorbs and filters rain where it lands rather than funnelling it straight down into the river. Rain gardens are one way to absorb excess rainwater.



Parramatta River by svIambo on Flickr

Living rivers are more than just swimming spots

Despite the headline grabbing swimmable rivers aspect, the plan to revive the Parramatta River is also obviously about bringing back native plants and wildlife, and establishing a healthy river ecosystem.

Councillor Mark Drury also says the Parramatta river is a real missed opportunity to improve the lives of the people living around it with features such as walking tracks and communal spaces.

“We want to highlight that as being a big asset to the city and an asset to think about looking after better. That way we can more enjoyment out of it.”

It's also about thinking deeper about the history of the place – particularly it's Indigenous heritage.

“Since the Burramatta people first called this region home some 40,000 years ago, the Parramatta River has been a valuable resource and gathering place for the local community,” City of Parramatta Lord Mayor Councillor Andrew Wilson says.

Comments on the draft Parramatta River Masterplan closed on 29 November.

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