

Well-designed dog parks offer great benefit

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Fenced specialty dog parks are offering great social and wellbeing benefits for both dogs and their owners - but they need to be well-designed for maximum gain, says a University of Adelaide veterinarian.

Dr Susan Hazel, lecturer in [animal behaviour](#), welfare and ethics at the University's School of Animal and Veterinary Sciences, based at the Roseworthy Campus, says the number of dog parks is growing every year and they are well-used around the world. In some popular parks surveyed, there have been more than 40 dogs within a 30 minute period.

"Australia has one of the highest rates of dog ownership in the world with 36% of [households](#) owning a dog," she says. "But as back yards have become smaller and leash laws enforced in many areas, it has become more difficult to exercise dogs safely off the leash while still keeping them under effective control.

"Dogs that are well-socialised and exercised are likely to be healthier, happier and less aggressive. Designated off-leash dog areas provide a safe community setting where dogs can play with each other."

Dr Hazel says the parks also benefit the dog-owners. People have social contact while their dogs are playing and some groups of dog park users have established Facebook sites.

"We've observed that people get a lot out of using the parks too, not so much with their own exercise but just through the opportunity to meet other people with dogs."

Despite these benefits, however, some dog parks have problems and could be better designed. Parks may be too small, others have no seats or shelter or sufficient parking, and others lack a suitable surface for the dogs to run on.

"There can be problems with entrance ways too," says Dr Hazel. "If the water and seats are too close to the gate, then you get a bottleneck as new people and dogs arrive."

Dr Hazel has been supervising a student project to monitor and survey dog parks across Adelaide and their users over the past four years. During that time, about 200 Animal Science students have taken part in visits. The students observe the numbers of dogs and people in the park, dog behaviour and interactions with other dogs and people, and how the park is used. Surveys also ask about travel to the park and user satisfaction. Overall there are very high levels of dog owner satisfaction with the dog parks.

"This research data is unique across Australia - no other capital city has this sort of information about their dog parks," she says. The data is now being put to good use by the Dog and Cat Management Board to establish guidelines for the design of future parks.

In Adelaide, there are 22 fenced dog parks with some additional areas where [dogs](#) can be exercised off-leash. Five of these have been opened in the past two years and more are currently being planned by councils.

Provided by University of Adelaide

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