How the community value Gold Coast beaches

Gold Coast beach culture is reflected throughout the city. From the northern foreshores to the southern point breaks and across the vast waterways, the attraction for a coastal lifestyle comes easily with 42km of accessible beaches and a subtropical climate. Two of the many drawcards that make the Gold Coast a national and international beach destination and a coastal city which the local community proudly value.

Due to the variety of coastal attractions, Gold Coast’s beaches support an increasingly diverse range of community values. It is important to understand community values and acknowledge how they can be integrated into the way the beaches are managed. In particular, to enhance the management of the coast and support community desires for a healthy coastal lifestyle.

Residents relationship to the beach

Whether it is for the love of surfing, walking the dog, exercising or simply gazing out to sea, Gold Coast’s residents have a strong relationship with the beach. In 2008, 8000 surveys were distributed throughout the city, to which over 1800 residents responded. The aim of the survey was to understand how residents value the beach and identify how key relationships can be integrated into the way the coast is managed.

The results of the survey suggest that Gold Coast’s residents have a very strong relationship to the beach. Figure 1 shows the importance of the beach to residents on a seven point scale; 0 = completely unimportant or definitely not important to 6 = very important or definitely. The beach and foreshore were found to be very important to more than 50% of respondents and almost 40% of respondents felt the beach was very important in choosing where to live.

Which beach is the most popular for Gold Coast residents?

Burleigh, Main Beach and The Spit were found to be the most frequent favourable beaches to visit among the respondents, with Froggies, North Kirra, Bilinga and North Broadbeach the least visited beaches by the respondents.
Beach visitation statistics
On a sunny summer’s day, thousands of residents flock to the beach to enjoy the sun, sand and surf. This was captured in the survey, which found on average respondents visit the beach ten times per month in summer and six times per month in winter.

The only demographic variable found to influence beach visitation rates was distance travelled to the beach. As Table 1 shows, it is interesting to note how as distance to the beach decreases visitation rates increase. Therefore, residents that live closer to the beach tend to visit the beach more often.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance</th>
<th>Visits per month summer</th>
<th>Visits per month winter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1km</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1km to 5kms</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6kms to 10kms</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10kms</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Gold Coast resident beach visitation

Public attitudes towards the beach
What are the important factors for public attitudes towards beaches? The survey found the most important factors in resident use of Gold Coast beaches were related to the cleanliness of the beach, foreshore and ocean. Safety was also highly ranked, both in terms of crime and lifeguarding services. The least important characteristics were public transport, romance, access to fitness classes and dog walking.

Beach activities
From relaxing and walking to swimming, surfing and snorkelling, Gold Coast’s beaches are used for a wide range of activities. When asked to rate the importance of a range of activities, the survey respondents ranked passive recreational activities such as being outdoors, relaxing and reading more highly than active recreational activities like surfing, surf lifesaving and keeping fit.

Beach management
Respondents were asked a series of question regarding beach management:
- 86% felt the beach was well maintained
- 71% agreed that the dune system at their most visited beach appeared to be healthy
- 47% of all survey respondents agreed that GCCC appeared to be listening to the community concerns about their most visited beach and foreshore area
- 30% of respondents had a negative opinion of GCCC’s beach management performance
- 25% were willing to participate in on-ground activities such as dune revegetation

The future
Respondents were asked what the key issues were for management of Gold Coast’s beaches and foreshores over the next 20 years. Concern for coastal protection issues was the highest issue ranked, with environmental service provision and accessibility to follow. This highlights how important it is to achieve a healthy and managed coast to support community values for Gold Coast’s beaches and lifestyle choices.