

# Shared Space: Current and Potential Uses of Aquatic Park

Erin Miller

## **Introduction**

Aquatic Park is one of Berkeley's largest recreation areas and serves the community on Berkeley's west side. The city currently lacks sufficient recreational space, therefore the enhancement of this area for increased public use is of primary concern to Berkeley's Waterfront Commission in its plan to refurbish the park. It is thought that the low usage of Aquatic Park is the result of a few major problems such as its industrial setting, poor accessibility, noise and crime. To determine which of these problems and possible other concerns users of Aquatic Park and the surrounding community have, I distributed a questionnaire to people at the park and conducted a brief "street corner poll" of the Berkeley community. Based on the survey data and on personal observations of park users, this paper explores possible alternatives to increase the park's desirability to the community. It is hoped that this information (along with other investigations of the park presented in this report), will help planners in their efforts to redevelop Aquatic Park as a place where nature and people can interact in Berkeley's unique waterfront environment.

## **Past Studies**

Few studies have focused on the public usage of Aquatic Park. Drexler (1985) used both observational and questionnaire data to survey the recreational uses on the waterfront area in general. She concluded that the popularity of the waterfront justifies further investment in improvements by the city of Berkeley and that additional police patrol is of primary importance at Aquatic Park. Another study of the waterfront by Edelstone (1982) also relies upon survey data, but focuses more on land use and expansion than on recreational uses. Nonetheless, his survey techniques and questions have been useful to my study. Cohn (1987) explored the environmental concerns of the users of the Berkeley Waterfront. Though his study did not include Aquatic Park, the questions he raised were both useful and relevant to my paper.

## Methodology

The main source of information for this paper came from the in-park questionnaire, which was completed by any person who was able to. Past studies using a public survey have come across many problems when trying to use statistically random techniques, e.g., Drexler (1985). Some of the people that I encountered were unable to answer the questionnaire because of a language barrier, or they were inaccessible due to activities such as jogging, bicycling or sitting in their cars. I also felt uncomfortable approaching any person that I felt was of questionable character. It is for this reason that I rely mainly on my personal observations for information about the park user's age, sex and types of activities engaged in.

The "street corner" poll was used to discover the public's familiarity with Aquatic Park. People were randomly selected as they entered and exited the selected supermarket and drugstore. They were asked questions about the park's locale, whether they have visited the park or not and reasons why they had not gone to the park.

My personal observations of the people and their activities at Aquatic Park were taken of 100 visitors, covering a range of weekend hours. This survey provided a base of information on the type of person who uses the park. It should be noted that some activities such as power boating, picnicking, sun bathing, etc. may not be fairly represented since the study was conducted during winter months. Some of the questions asked in the questionnaire are repeated in the observational data in order to ensure that those people I questioned were a good representative cross section of park users.

Additional information about Aquatic Park's crime history was obtained from the Community Services section of the Berkeley Police Department. Felony crime statistics from the years 1986 and 1988 as well as personal information were obtained from Officer Craig Juster.

## Data

**"Street Corner" Poll:** In my survey of the surrounding community, I chose the locations of Bill's Drug Store, situated approximately three miles northwest of the park, and the Canned Foods Outlet Store, located one half mile north of the park. I chose these two locations in order to compare people's familiarity with the site in conjunction with their proximity to it.

The survey consisted of five questions. The first question asked if the person was familiar with the name Aquatic Park (Figure 1). Approximately 80 percent of the respondents had heard of the location and surprisingly, more people were acquainted with it at the more distant location. Secondly, people were asked if they could give someone specific directions to the park (Figure 2). This graph shows that at Bill's Drug, 32 percent of those surveyed were not able to give someone directions to the park. Similarly, at Canned Foods, 53 percent could not give directions to the park even though it is located only a half mile away.

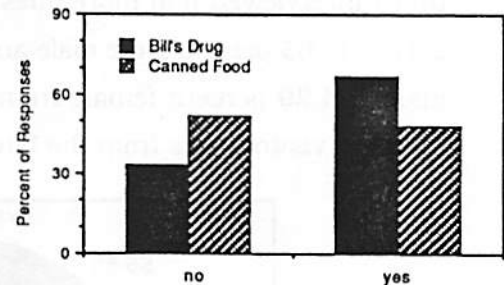
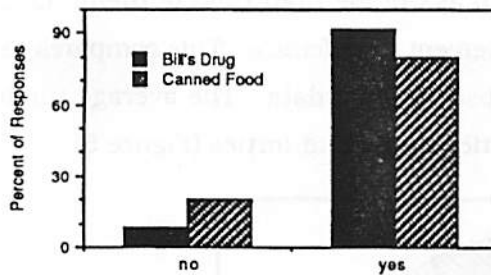


Figure 1. "Have you heard of Aquatic Park?"

Figure 2. "Would you be able to give directions to the park?"

When asked if the respondent has ever visited the park before (Figure 3) the response was divided evenly, with slightly more of the people who were interviewed at Bill's Drug having been there before. It was also observed that of those who knew of Aquatic Park, 65 percent of those interviewed at Bill's Drug and 60 percent at Canned Foods had actually gone there before (data not shown). People who had visited the location before were then asked how many times during the past year had they actually been there (Figure 4). The average was overwhelmingly 1-5 visits a year. Canned Foods showed a slightly higher percentage of people who had gone there more often.

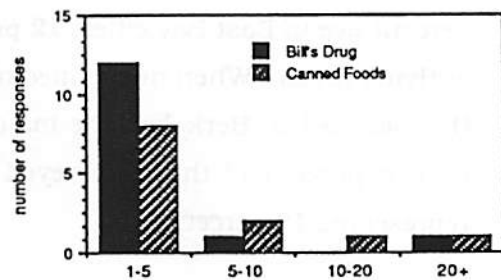
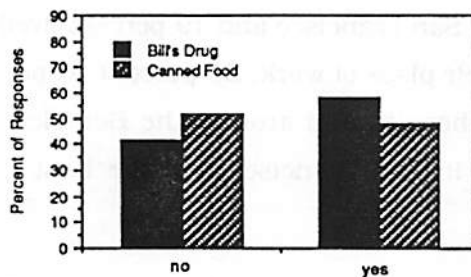


Figure 3. "Have you visited the park?"

Figure 4. "If yes, how many times have you gone in the past year?"

Finally, people were asked what reasons have made them decide not to visit Aquatic Park. Most people said that Aquatic Park never entered their mind when deciding where to go for recreation. Others said that its location next to the freeway was unappealing and a couple of people said that they didn't have a car to get to there.

**In-park questionnaire and observations:** When conducting the survey of park visitors, I found that most people showed a profound interest in the park. Many times the people that I interviewed had more questions to ask of me than I did of them. Of the people I surveyed, 65 percent were male and 35 percent were female. This compares to 71 percent male and 29 percent female from my observational data. The average range of ages of the park visitors was from the late twenties to the mid-forties (Figure 5).

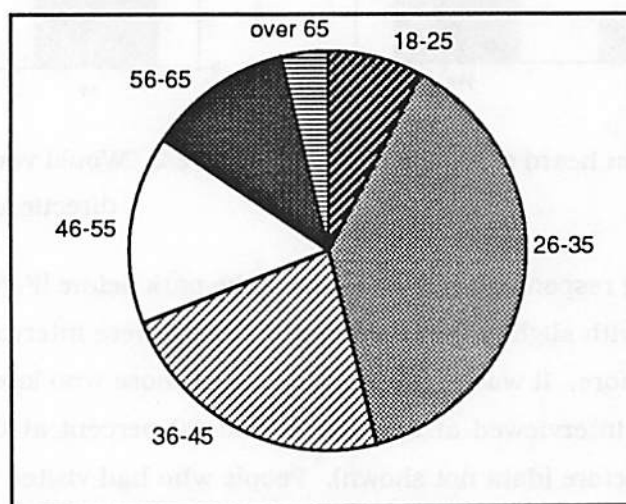


Figure 5. How old are you?

When asked where he or she resided (Figure 6), the findings show that about 70 percent live in East Bay cities, 12 percent in San Francisco and 19 percent lived in other outlying areas. When questioned about their place of work, 38 percent responded that they worked in Berkeley, the majority of those in and around the Berkeley campus. Fifteen percent of those surveyed worked in San Francisco and the East Bay cities represented 12 percent.

The next set of questions sought to answer if respondents had ever visited the park previously, how often they visit, during what days of the week, and what type of transportation they used. Of the people interviewed, 88 percent had visited the location before, only 12 had not. When questioned on how often they came to the park (Figure 7),

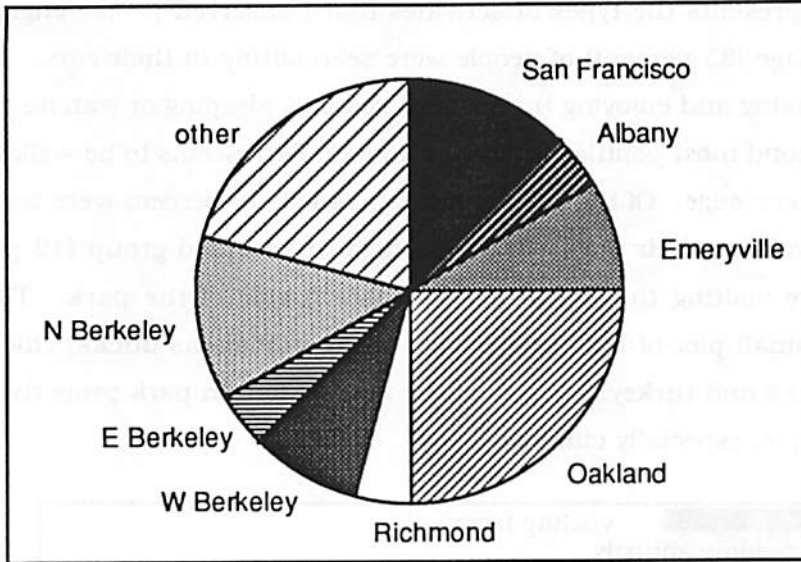


Figure 6. "Where do you live?"

the majority of the people either visited on a regular basis or very infrequently. Forty-three percent replied that they visited less than once a month, followed by 26 percent who said that they came more than three times a week. The majority (65 percent) of the respondents said that usually came on their days off.

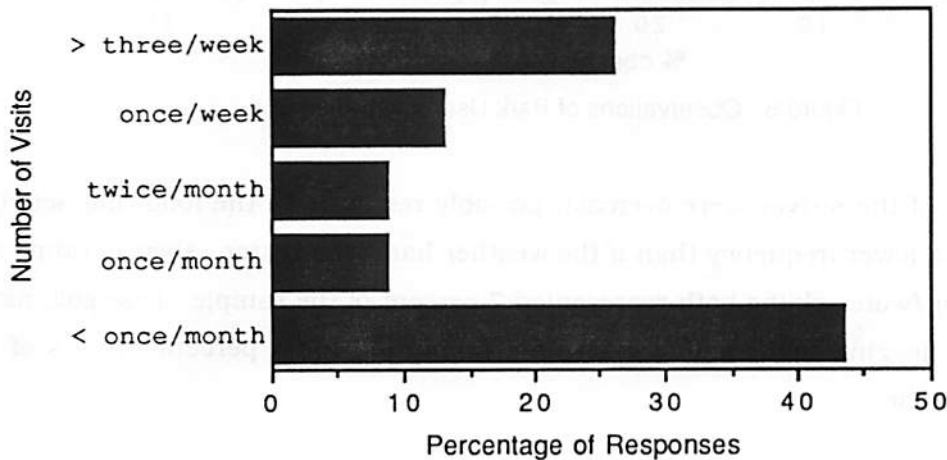


Figure 7. "How often do you visit the park?"

Thirty percent said they had no preference between work-day and off-day visits. Only five percent said that they visited the park just during their workdays. The mode of transportation that the overwhelming majority (75 percent) of respondents used to get to the park was by automobile. Walking and bicycles followed with a 10 percent share each. Public transportation received no responses in the survey.

Figure 8 represents the types of activities that I observed people engaged in. The largest percentage (35 percent) of people were seen sitting in their cars. These people were either relaxing and enjoying the scenery, reading, sleeping or watching the water skiers. The second most popular activity at Aquatic Park seems to be walking along the path at the water's edge. Of the people that I recorded, 19 percent were walking and 10 percent were walking their dogs. The next highest recorded group (12 percent) were those who were visiting the "farm" on the eastern side of the park. This "farm" is situated on a small plot of land and houses such animals as ducks, chickens, goats, rabbits, peacocks and turkeys. Though the farm is not on park property, it attracted quite a few people, especially children.

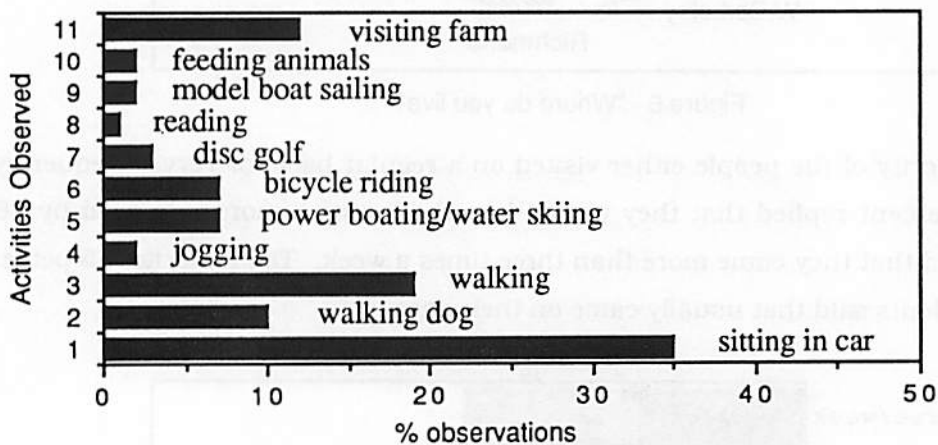


Figure 8. Observations of Park User's Activities

The days of the survey were overcast, possibly resulting in the following activities occurring at a lower frequency than if the weather had been better. Bicycle riding and power-boating/water-skiing both represented 7 percent of the sample. Disc golf, model boat sailing, jogging and reading each only accounted for 3 percent or less of the observed activities.

Figure 9 shows which areas of the park the people surveyed used most often. The east side of the park was preferred by a little over 50 percent of the people interviewed. Approximately 25 percent of the respondents showed no preference towards any area. The favorite spots of the other 25 percent were dispersed throughout the west side and north and south ends.

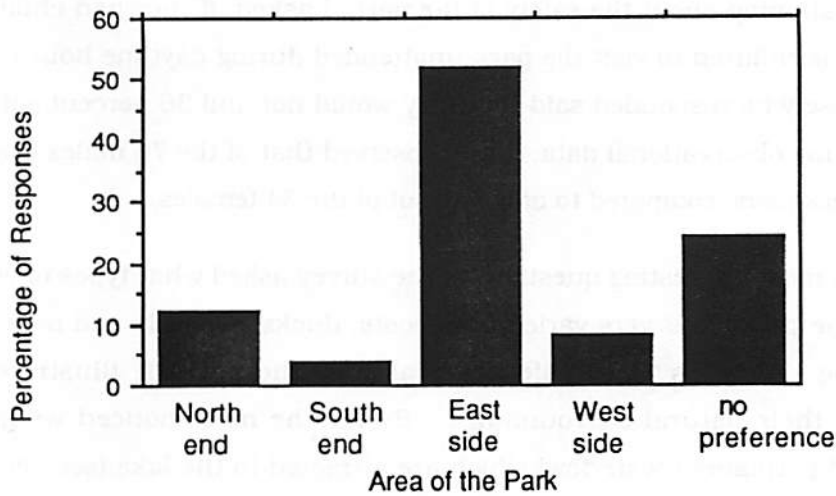


Figure 9. Which area of the park do you prefer?

When asked what physical aspects of the park they enjoyed most, the majority of the participants mentioned the lake. Other responses included the park's landscape, size, walking paths, trees, birds and disc golf course. Among some of the dislikes that people expressed, 52 percent mentioned the freeway or the noise associated with it. The automobile traffic on the access road through the park and the hazards that the water presents each represented 13 percent of the responses. Other comments included litter, dog feces, overall lack of maintenance, the train tracks, surrounding factories and the inconvenience of not being able to drive completely around the park.

Many of the people interviewed did not suggest that any improvements be made at the park. Of those that did, none mentioned any major renovations of the park. The most drastic change people sought was the construction of a sound barrier, but most other additions followed along the lines of additional benches, picnic areas, restrooms, a snack bar and increased night lighting. Some people remarked upon the need to keep the park grounds and lake clean to restore the natural beauty of the park.

People were asked what changes in the current park setting would cause them to no longer use the facility. Again, little over half of those interviewed responded. The major concern the respondents expressed was further development of the area which may cause more people to use the park. They opposed the idea of adding amusement rides, vendors or more motorized sports. Those responding were also opposed to the removal of the disc golf course or the restriction of dogs in the park.

When questioning about the safety of the park, I asked, if they had children, would they allow their children to visit the park unattended during daytime hours. Sixty-four percent of those who responded said that they would not and 36 percent said that they would. From my observational data, it was observed that of the 76 males that I saw, 31 were at the park alone compared to only one out of the 34 females.

One of the most interesting questions of the survey asked what types of wildlife were observed at the park. Answers varied from coots, ducks, seagulls and moles. Besides demonstrating the types of wildlife observable at the park, it illustrates people's awareness of their natural surroundings. By far the most noticed wildlife are the migratory and permanent waterfowl which are attracted to the lake (see accompanying paper by Coates in this report).

The final two questions of the survey concerned water quality and the possibility of constructing a sound wall along the west side of the park, as suggested by Caltrans as part of the I-80 expansion. When asking about the water quality of the park, I divided it into categories of drinkable, swimmable, fishable or not safe at all. Surprisingly only 46 percent of those responding thought the water not to be safe at all. Categories of fishable and swimmable each received 27 percent of the responses. Thankfully, there were no responses for drinkable water quality. The sound wall issue was not so easily decided. There were 60 percent who agreed with the proposal and 40 percent who did not.

**Crime Statistics:** Despite its reputation, Aquatic Park does not have a higher than average crime rate for its area. Theft and burglary are the two crimes that occur most frequently at the park (Juster, 1989, pers. comm.). Many auto thefts and break-ins have occurred in the parking lot of the newly-established Golden Gate Brewery, increasing that statistic slightly over the previous year. Infrequent arrests for lewd and lascivious behavior, indecent exposure, disturbing the peace and possession of drugs have occurred. It is known that at least one rape and two felony assaults has taken place at the park (BPD Crime stat., 1987, 1988). As Officer Juster stressed, most of these crimes occurred at night and are not unusual for the area.

Though not a crime, a fact worth mentioning about the park is that it is known to be a spot for "gay cruising" and other homosexual acts. Its location near local bath houses and its relative isolation has lent itself to this type of activity. Because of the "gay cruising", Aquatic Park has acquired an unpleasant reputation that the city has been



trying to remedy. Again, most of these occurrences happen at night and do not interfere with other park patrons.

## **Discussion**

From the results of my observations, the street corner poll and the in-park questionnaire, a few patterns and problems can be seen. Of foremost concern is the unfamiliarity of the park to the Berkeley community. Nearly 50 percent of the people surveyed could not give directions to the park even though its access roads are off two major boulevards. When questioned, many people did not recognize the name Aquatic Park, but were more familiar with it as the "park next to the freeway". If the city of Berkeley wants to increase park usage, it will definitely have to address these identity and access problems.

Other problems that the park faces are the deteriorating condition of the grounds, proximity to the freeway and its reputation as an unsafe park. In the survey of park users, I would say at least 50 percent mentioned the disrepair of the park, from the boarded-up restrooms to the masses of weeds along the water's edge. Well over half of the respondents mentioned the noise in the park from the freeway as well as from the power boats. Even though most complained about the noise, many said that they became tolerant to it once their ears adjusted to the noise.

Finally, the park suffers from a reputation of being a haven for crime and homosexual activities. Most people surveyed said that they believed the park to be unsafe for children. The results from my observations showed that only one woman out of 100 people to be at the park alone, suggesting that women fear to be unaccompanied at the park. Although I did not specifically ask about the park's reputation as being a "gay cruiser" spot, many people mentioned the fact to me as I interviewed them. It is quite widely known that the park attracts such activity.

My data also point to some predominant trends about the park users. I believe most importantly is the age of the park user and where they reside. The rather older age of the average park user suggests that either parents believe the park unsafe for their children or there are not enough facilities for the children to enjoy. If safety is the determining factor, then planners should gear the park toward adult usage.

Secondly, Aquatic Park is not a neighborhood park. A majority of the visitors live in other East Bay cities besides Berkeley and very few people actually lived in west

Berkeley. This is mostly due to the isolation of the park from the surrounding community. It is bound on the west by the freeway, the north and south by two major thoroughfares and on the east by railroad tracks and industry. This again demonstrates how Aquatic Park's low visibility is effecting its usership.

## **Conclusions**

From the data that I have collected, I have formulated a few suggestions that I feel to be appropriate for the future development of Aquatic Park. Most importantly, clearly-marked access routes to the site must be available to enable people in the surrounding communities of the park to know of its presence and how to get there. Ideas would include an off-ramp sign at either the Ashby Avenue or University Avenue exits, and larger and more visible signs directing autos to the park on University Ave and San Pablo Avenue (in both the eastward and westward directions). For easier access to the park by foot or bicycle, better paved roads are needed especially across the railroad tracks. A possible bike lane along Addison Street leading to the park would make bicycle access much safer.

Of secondary importance is the upgrading of the park's environment. I would suggest some sort of sound barrier, either a wall or a natural barrier such as trees or earthen berm, to lessen the noise from the freeway, but not to distract from its natural beauty. The park's lawns and vegetation are in need of some upkeep. Visitors to the park were very interested in the plants and wildlife they saw at the park, so perhaps some sort of nature trail that follows the circumference of the lake and introduces the types of native flora and animal life to be found at the park, would be a nice addition. Apart from the educational value of a nature exhibit, usage of the park may become more evenly distributed as people walk around the lake.

Next, the park's facilities need to be upgraded. There are very few benches set around the park and there is only one primary picnic area with restrooms. The par course and frisbee golf course are in disrepair. Signs are unreadable and the courses are heavily weeded and ill-maintained. The walking and bike path is the most heavily used portion of the park and should be routinely groomed and maintained. If adequate water quality is obtained in the model boat pond, the addition of a viewing dock and benches in that area would be desired. I would not suggest any other development of the area, such as vendors, snack bars or arcades. The majority of users come to the park for its natural environment and relaxing atmosphere and that should be maintained.

Safety has been considered a problem at the park, but statistics show otherwise. The entire area on Berkeley's western end tends to have a higher incidence of crime than other areas of Berkeley, and Aquatic Park is no different. I would suggest however, increased lighting at night, especially along the eastern access road. During the daylight hours, visitors would feel it comforting to have a patrolman on foot at the park at least a couple of times a day and more so on weekends.

What has plagued Aquatic Park over these past years has been neglect. It is truly a beautiful park with many facilities to offer the surrounding community. All that needs to be accomplished is to educate the public on its existence and location, create a clean and safe environment and possibly reduce the ill-effects that the freeway creates in the park. I believe with these steps, city planners will find an increased usage of the park.

### References

- Berkeley Police Department, 1987 and 1988. Felony Crime Statistics, census tract #20.
- Cohn, E., 1987. Environmental concerns of Berkeley waterfront users. In *Growing Pains in the San Francisco Bay Area*; D. Sloan and T. Fletcher, eds.; U.C. Berkeley Environmental Sciences Seminar report, Berkeley, CA, pp. 1-8.
- Drexler, J., 1985. Recreational uses of the Berkeley waterfront. In *Open Space and Development in the Bay Area*; D. Sloan, ed.; U.C. Berkeley Environmental Sciences Seminar report, Berkeley, CA, pp. 51-59.
- Edelstone, G., 1982. Recreational uses of the East Bay shoreline. In *The East Bay Shoreline: selected Environmental Issues*; D. Sloan ed.; U.C. Berkeley Environmental Sciences Seminar report, Berkeley, CA, pp. 223-236.
- Juster, C., Patrol Officer, Berkeley Police Department, Berkeley, California. Personal communication, 1989.