Public park or private gym: boot camps or bloody nuisance?

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Jason Byrne has previously received funding from the United Stated National Park Service, and the Queensland Government former departments of Infrastructure and Planning and Environment and Resource Management. He is affiliated with the Better Parks Alliance and is a member of the Planning Institute of Australia, Institute of Australian Geographers, and Association of American Geographers.
Fitness “boot camps” are becoming an increasingly common feature within Australian parks.

Typically, a personal trainer will charge a modest fee to instruct a small group that gathers in a public park to work out. Sessions usually last about an hour.

But as boot camps have grown in popularity, some park users and residents have become annoyed by the noise and competition for space. People have called for the practice to be closely regulated or banned altogether.

Is this fair and what are the alternatives?
The problem with boot camps

The trouble is that in some cities such as the Gold Coast, some park users and nearby residents are becoming fed up and complain their parks are “overrun” by boot camps. They want their local councils to do something about it.

Some boot camps have pumping music, training equipment and yelling instructors, which can disturb other park users and nearby residents. Some people also feel that businesses should not profit from public parks – at least not without giving something back to the community.

The Santa Monica City Council in the United States is considering closing down “boot camps” altogether, whereas the Gold Coast City Council, like some other Australian councils, is proposing to regulate them and charge instructors a fee for using public parks and reserves.

Boot camp supporters argue that participants have a right to use public parks, because they pay council rates too. Boot camps also benefit society by making people fitter and healthier. Some have questioned the right of local authorities to regulate park uses. This raises some important questions: Why does conflict occur in parks? Who are parks for? Who should decide what is acceptable behaviour in a park? Do local councils have the right to regulate park use?

What causes conflict in parks?

Researchers have found that conflict can occur in parks for multiple reasons. Park users may see these spaces as appropriate for some activities but not others.

Conflict can also occur because some park activities disturb or disrupt other park users, causing them to change the part of parks they visit, alter the time of day they visit, switch parks altogether, or switch the activities they undertake. Local residents can also be affected by high levels of park use.

Is conflict in parks new?

Conflict among park users is as old as parks themselves. Parks began as the hunting preserves of the social elite. Following the industrial revolution, when people flocked into cities from the countryside, urban reformers demanded private estates be opened to the general public to improve the life of residents. London’s favourite parks such as Hyde Park and Regents Park began this way.
In the United States, park designers copied the European model and deliberately created “rural-like” spaces in the city. These parks, which resembled landscaped gardens, were intended as places where people could escape the stresses of urban life, relax, and commune with nature, but also interact with each other. In principle, parks were democratic spaces.

But park designers also regarded early parks as “civilised” spaces for “passive recreation” – activities such as running and ball-games were regarded as ill-mannered and inappropriate. Some early parks developed reputations as places where prostitution, gambling, drunkenness, and robbery were common.

Park rangers and park police were created to regulate use, especially activities deemed immoral or offensive. Early Australian parks such as Sydney’s Hyde Park developed rules like “keep off the grass” to prevent park users from damaging park facilities, but also prohibited rude language, gambling, climbing trees, playing musical instruments, bathing, washing clothes and even singing.

Why and how are park activities regulated?

Regulating activities within parks and managing the behaviour of park users has occurred since the first parks were created. Usually this is done by developing local laws with penalties that apply for breaching park rules. Some rules make perfect sense. Playing golf or flying model aircraft can present a safety hazard for park users.
But other park rules can be discriminatory, excluding some racial or ethnic groups who enjoy particular activities. For example, Latinos in the USA have argued that prohibiting soccer excludes them from parks.

There are alternatives. Researchers have shown that the design of parks can strongly influence how parks are used and can thus reduce conflict. Carefully designing the physical space of parks may encourage some activities but make other activities difficult or unappealing. Subtle design cues can promote better behaviour without the need for fines, penalties or long lists of rules.

The space within parks can also be allocated for particular activities. Playgrounds, dog parks, skateboard parks and community gardens were once derided just as boot camps are today, yet they all have their place. And we can allocate activities according to time of day – designating places where activities are permitted at certain times but not others.

**So what should be done about boot camps?**

At face value, allowing boot camps in parks seems reasonable, especially in an era when public authorities are struggling to combat sedentary lifestyles and obesity. Researchers have found that parks can help people to be more physically active. Boot camps are common in parks in the United States, Canada and United Kingdom and are regulated through permits.
Instructors are required to have insurance and must operate in designated spaces at specific times of the day. Many councils around the world are also installing fitness equipment in parks. So it seems like a logical step to add boot camps to park programming.

At a time when planners and health officials are working to make parks livelier, more inclusive, and spaces that promote physical activity – boot camps surely have their place.

If rock concerts, art exhibitions, movies and food festivals are appropriate in parks – why not boot camps too?

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