



Water-related jargon: How much does the community understand?

Industry Note
Program A: Society
Project A2.3

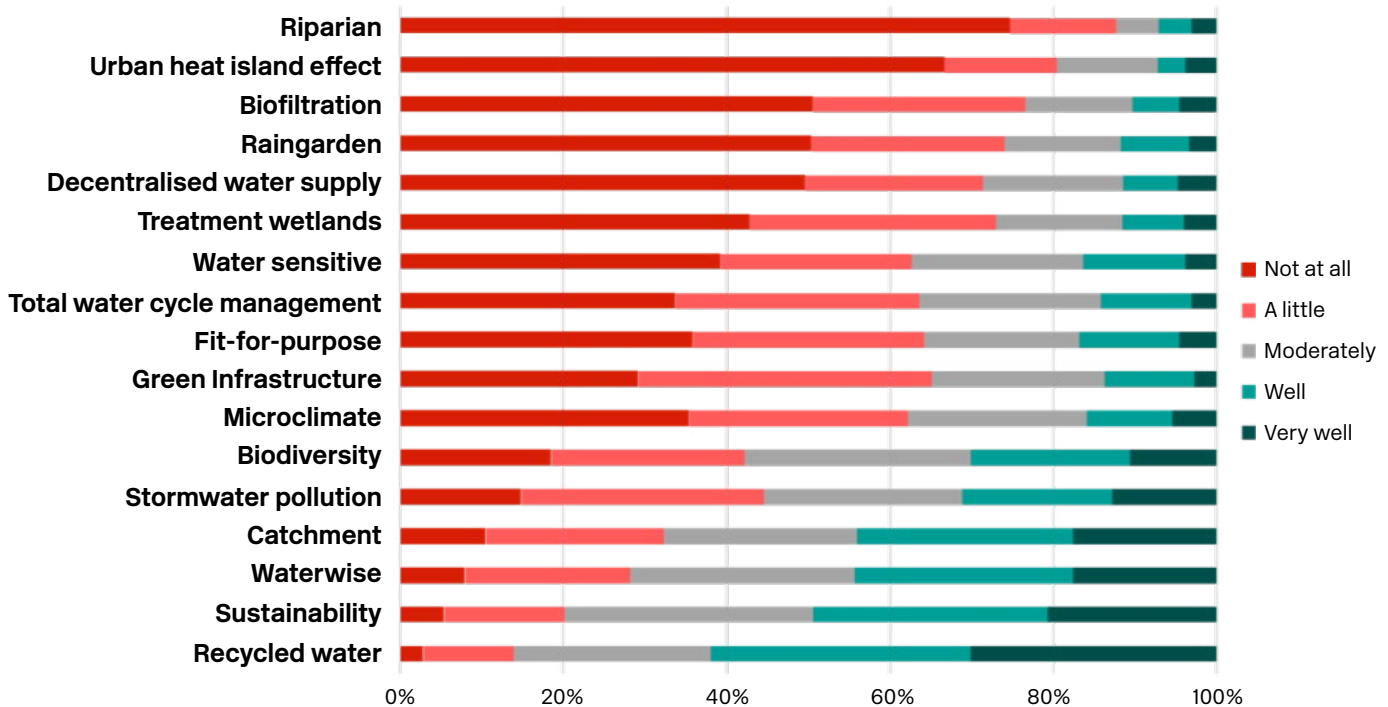
Communicating effectively with local citizens is an essential part of changing household behaviours, such as promoting shorter showers, and building public support for new policies and technologies. Many commonly used water terms, such as riparian, biofiltration and 'urban heat island effect', are not understood by the general public. Using technical terms in education campaigns and communication activities may reduce the effectiveness of these campaigns.

What terms do the community understand?

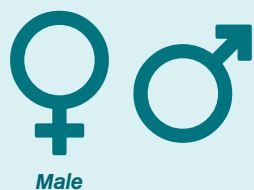
415 community members were asked to rate the degree to which they understood key water-related terms on a scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very well).

- The least understood word was 'riparian': only 3% understood it well; 75% did not understand it at all.
- The most understood word was 'recycled water': 30% understood it very well; 3% did not understand it at all.

Self-rated understanding of water-related terms



Who has a better understanding of these terms?



People with greater education and greater water-related knowledge



Jargon can create a barrier to seeking information

If you provide online opportunities for people to learn more about technical terms, don't assume that they will look them up or read further. We found that when given the opportunity to seek more information about water words via online links, only people with higher levels of knowledge, education and comfort using technical terms sought out information. People with low knowledge and who were uncomfortable with these words were less likely to seek further information.

Survey methods

We conducted a survey of 415 residents of Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney and Perth. The participants contained a representative mix of genders, ages and incomes. We provided a list of words and asked respondents to rate: (1) the degree to which they understood the word, and (2) how comfortable they were with the word.

What terms do people prefer?

We provided description of the concepts behind some of the words, and asked participants what words they thought would be useful. Suggested words included:

- For **'biofiltration'**: 'natural filtration', 'natural pollutant removal' or 'natural purification'
- For **'Decentralised water supply'**: 'nonmains water', 'shared water assets', or 'neighbourhood water supply'
- For **'Fit for purpose water'**: 'purpose-specific water treatment', or 'wise use of water'
- For **'water sensitive city'**: 'waterwise city', 'green city', or 'water-friendly city'

What terms do people prefer?

- The use of jargon excludes those with poor knowledge and understanding - avoid jargon as much as possible
- Before releasing new materials, ensure that content is reviewed by representatives of your target audience
- Where appropriate, try substituting or complementing technical terms with words preferred by community members

After a range of questions examining water-related knowledge and demographics, we provided people with the opportunity to 'click' on each of the words to see the definition. Clicking on the words was used as a proxy measure of information seeking. Statistical analysis identified what characteristics of both the words and the participants were associated with greater information seeking.

About the research

This research was conducted as part of the CRCWSC project Engaging communities with Water Sensitive Cities (Project A2.3).

This project's main objectives are to identify community knowledge about water management, identify the most effective language, terminology and visuals to communicate with the public about water management, and identify effective methods to engage the communities in the transition to water sensitive cities.

Further reading

Dean A, Fielding K, Newton F & Ross, H. (2015) Community knowledge about water: Who has better water-related knowledge and is this important? Melbourne, Australia: Cooperative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities.

Fielding K, Dean A, & Newton F. (2016) Community understanding of water terminology: A survey of Australia community members' understanding of water-related terminology. Melbourne, Australia: Cooperative Research Centre for Water Sensitive Cities.

Engaging communities with Water Sensitive Cities

Further information



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<http://www.watersensitivecities.org.au>
Project website: <https://goo.gl/nuiaYN>



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