Bois de la Cambre in Brussels: thoroughfare or park?

VUB and ULB research on the traffic desires shows a divide between the centre and periphery.

Traffic in the Bois de la Cambre in Brussels has been the subject of intense debate for quite some time now. Should it be open or closed to traffic? Researchers of the VUB and ULB, in collaboration with the Brussels Studies Institute (BSI) conducted a survey on the aspirations for the park. Generally speaking, the researchers found that mainly the respondents’ personal situation is an important predictor for their desires (e.g., age, familial situation, place of residence or work, mobility practices and access to green spaces). Nicola da Schio: “Findings show that mainly people living in the central areas of Brussels and the people having less access to green spaces, want the entirety of the park closed for traffic. Older people and daily car drivers on the other hand, would rather see the entire park open for traffic.”

Nicola da Schio of the VUB research group COSMOPOLIS, Claire Pelgrims of the ULB research group LoUIsE, and Sebastiano Cincinnati and Anneloes Vandenbroucke of the Brussels Studies Institute examined the preferences for different potential mobility setups of the Bois de la Cambre. The survey consisted of questions on current use of the park, desires for its future, mobility practices, life and work contexts, and the use of green spaces. It was conducted between November 27th and December 7th, 2020. After a thorough data cleaning, the researchers had a database of 7,252 valid responses at their disposal.

Based on the preferences for the setup for the park, respondents were divided into three groups:

1. Unrestricted access for traffic (Allow Traffic),
2. Limited access for traffic (Middle Ground) and
3. No access for traffic (Ban Traffic)

Subsequently, the socio-demographic background, the place of residence and work, the mobility practices and the access to green spaces of respondents were analysed. da Schio: “The research did not intend to answer the question what setup of the park receives the most public support because we did not want to reduce it to a simple black or white discussion.”

The findings mainly indicate a field of tension between a focus on a good flow of traffic and a focus on the recreative use of the park. Noteworthy is that respondents in the Allow Traffic group are older on average (mean age: 50). Also, pensioners and entrepreneurs are represented relatively more (15% and 29%). These Allow Traffic-respondents also live or work more often in the municipalities further away from the centre (e.g. only 21% live in the central municipalities of the region) and more often use individual motorised transport (90% are regular car drivers vs. the regional average of 36%).
The Ban Traffic group displays a very different picture: respondents are the youngest on average (mean age: 41), live more often in the centre (62% live in the central municipalities of the region) and use more often the bicycle (76% are regular cyclists vs. 13% in the region). Regular users of public transport are generally underrepresented in the sample. The Middle Ground group has an intermediate profile compared to the other groups.

On Friday, the results of the study were presented to representatives of the municipalities and the region in order to demonstrate which concerns people have in relation to different possible decisions with regard to the park. da Schio: “It is our hope that this study will lead to more nuance in the debate. We were able to demonstrate that the life-work context, the dependence on certain means of transport and the access to green spaces play a crucial role. The decision on the Bois de la Cambre can only benefit from a broader discussion on and investigation of green spaces and mobility in the city.”


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