

Urban Nature and Australian Environmentalism: The urban experience of members of environmental groups in Hobart and Perth

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1960s, the defence of nature in Australia has been predominantly and explicitly organised around the idea of wilderness and, more implicitly, around its antithesis, the city. In this defence, real, authentic nature is argued to begin at road's end, beyond the lights of the city. By implication, the sub/urban majority of the population has been understood to live in tragically fallen environments in which dreams of escape offer most hope of reunion with nature. Over the last fifteen years, stories of nature not built around the purity of wilderness and the impurity of the city have begun to be told with increasing confidence. Many of these 'new' natures bring with them strategies of nature advocacy that offer a less dispiriting picture of urban and suburban environments. These strategies are an important yet ill-understood aspect of the growing diversity and complexity of environmental social movements in Australia. This paper investigates some of these recent changes by, first, surveying recent academic and public interest in urban nature in Australia, and, second, relating this interest to analysis of environmental social movements via a preliminary report on interviews with members of *The Greens* and *The Wilderness Society* living in Hobart and Perth. This research focuses on the often dissonant relationship between life-histories, everyday sub/urban experience and environmentalist discourse. It seeks to extend understanding not just of the on-going re-invention of environmental concern, but also to advance discussion about sub/urban sustainability through exploring possibilities for a more self-reflexive environmentalist advocacy of nature.

INTRODUCTION

Representations of the city and nature as mutually exclusive have long been common in modern English-speaking societies. As a result, the idea of urban nature has surfaced only rarely in their public and academic discourses of nature. Leo Marx's (1964) *The Machine in the Garden* and Raymond Williams' (1973) *The Country and the City* stand out among many historical accounts of the cultural ambivalence that has accompanied the industrial city in these societies. Robert Fishman's (1987) *Bourgeois Utopias* similarly stands out as an account of the embodiment of this ambivalence in the modern suburb. Australian cities, in particular, have been shaped by ambivalence towards modern progress that has seen domestic nature, 'nature-at-home', linked with themes of Edenic harmony, moral probity, health, community, self-resourcefulness and economic independence (A. Davison, 2005; Davison, 1995, 1997; Hogan, 2003).

Another twist has lately been added to this history of ambivalence in Australia through the rise, predominantly within cities, of post-war environmental movements devoted to wilderness. Understanding wilderness as the antithesis of the city, such movements are often impassioned in their disapproval of suburban 'sprawl' yet, nonetheless, share a great deal with earlier suburban

attempts to overcome urban alienation from nature and to place limits on the technological domination of nature. These movements have, in general, developed without strong awareness of their own history (see Hutton & Connors, 1999), and thus have failed to see the irony in their criticisms of suburban aspirations and the ways they have built upon a tradition of what art historian Bernard Smith (1976, 292) called “the creation and maintenance of a false consciousness of what it is to be an Australian.” Whether framed around pioneer dreaming of ‘the bush’ or environmentalist dreaming of ‘the wilderness’, and whether sustained through the paintings of the Heidelberg School or television documentaries of Kakadu, the prime achievement of this false consciousness has been to render cities—and especially the suburban environments that have been home to the majority of the population for several generations now—banal, uninspiring and unnatural.

Mindful of this historical context, the first section of this paper presents evidence that this false consciousness is weakening as the meanings of urban nature are being renegotiated in the ecological and social sciences and in wider culture. The second section considers how this renegotiation challenges conventional environmentalist discourses. The third section introduces material from interviews with members of *The Wilderness Society* and the *Australian Greens* living in Hobart and Perth. This material exposes a tension between environmentalist discourse and everyday experience of urban nature that points to the need for greater self-reflexivity within Australian environmentalism. More positively, it also points to the potential of such reflexivity to lead to more empathetic and constructive engagement by environmentalists with suburban aspirations in discussions about the environmental and social future of Australian cities.

I. ‘BACKYARD NATURE’ IN AUSTRALIA

George Seddon (Seddon, 1970, 1997) has been one the more eloquent of what has been, until recently, a relatively small number of scholars who have explicitly resisted attempts to locate either Australian identity or Australian nature somewhere beyond the ordinary everyday worlds of Australians. But change is afoot and the ‘backyard nature’ that so interested Seddon is now of interest to a growing number in the ecological sciences who accept the need for ‘conservation where people live and work’ (Miller & Hobbs, 2002). Biologist Tim Low’s *New Nature* (2002), for example, has exposed a wide audience to an exhaustive chronicle of Australian organisms and ecosystems responding creatively to anthropogenic change. Building upon efforts to orient ecological theory around ideas of flux, thereby decentering assumptions about ‘the balance of nature’ and the ‘purity of wilderness’ (eg., Botkin, 1990; Zimmerer, 2000), Low revels in the task of demonstrating that “nature is seldom as natural as we think” (Low, 2002, 57). In the process, he unmasks Australian cities as “extraordinary places[,] ... far more significant, ecologically, than most of us think” (Low, 2002, 106). Reflecting this emerging awareness, several Australian universities now have research programs under headings such as suburban wildlife, urban biodiversity planning and urban forests. A symposium on ‘The Ecology of Urban Environments’, held as part of the conference of the Australian Ecological Society, and the publication of a volume on urban wildlife by the Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales (Lunney & Burgin, 2004), both in 2004, suggests that the gap between Australian and international urban ecological research—a gap that can be seen in contributions to the journal *Urban Ecosystems*, for example—will soon be closed.

Australian social researchers have also begun to take greater interest in everyday encounters with nature. This interest follows in the wake of intense debates about the ‘social construction’ of nature that have been prominent in sociology (Macnaghten & Urry, 1998) and geography (Demeritt, 2002) since the early-1990s. Initially provoking an unhelpful stand-off between uncompromisingly ‘realist’ and ‘constructivist’ positions, such debates have become more subtle and productive over the last few years as attention has turned to positions that take nature to be neither reducible to objective reality nor reducible to human subjectivity, but inseparably entangled with culture (e.g.,

Harrison et al., 2004; Szerszynski et al., 2003; Whatmore 2002). Accounts of the entanglement of culture and nature lend themselves to analysis of explicitly hybrid environments such as cities (Gandy, 2005; Hinchcliffe *et al.*, 2005). Reflecting this, there has been a recent burst of Australian research on such topics as garden ‘natures’ (Gaynor, 2005; Head & Muir, 2004; Head & Muir, 2005; Head *et al.*, 2004; Head *et al.*, 2003; Power, 2005; Zagorski *et al.*, 2004), domestic human-animal relations (Franklin, 2005; Franklin & White, 2001) and suburban aspirations (Davison, 2005; Hogan, 2003). There are also signs that radical ecology literatures, such as deep ecology, are, belatedly, turning their attention to the city with the environmental philosopher Freya Matthews advocating that Australians become native to the city (Mathews, 2005) and the literary ‘ecocritic’ Kate Rigby raising the question of what it might mean for Australian cities to become the “locus of ecological holiness” (Rigby, 2004, xii).

Awakened interest in backyard natures is, however, by no means limited to academics. The terms of nature are beginning to be rewritten within popular consciousness and everyday life in ways that open up new possibilities for thinking about Australian cities (see, eg., NSW NPWS, 2002). As journalist James Woodford put it in his introduction to the papers in *Urban Wildlife: More than meets the eye*, “[e]very Australian city has a wildlife underworld. A pumping, thumping ecosystem that exists in spite of and because of us. Nearly everyone I know has a brushtail possum story” (Woodford, 2004, iii). This claim was underscored by the overwhelmingly enthusiastic response to the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s (ABC) invitation to the public in April 2004 to imagine what might be learnt “if we all really looked at our own backyards - 20 million pairs of eyes across Australia looking at what’s living there” (ABC n.d.). Over 5 weeks, more than 27 thousand people—the majority from cities—completed the first *WildWatch Australia* on-line survey about backyard natures, offering in the process, thousands of stories of everyday encounters with nature. The extent of this interest prompted the launch of a second survey on ‘backyard pests’ in late-2004. It is reflected also in the sudden growth in popular science writing about urban nature, such as this recent evocative account of the suburban world of Brisbane’s microbats by two zoologists in *Wildlife Australia Magazine*:

Twilight in a lush, sub-tropical metropolis. The sweet ripeness of mangoes sharpens to a decaying stink; the last roosting calls of kookaburras and grey butcherbirds ripple through the heat; insects flutter around street-lights and through the long grass. Beneath wailing police sirens, whining mosquitos masquerade as Messerschmitts, penetrating evening sounds and socks and leaving a painful itch. Dark shapes gliding across the sky add their squawks and chattering to the evening cacophony.... [D]eep within the city’s drains, hollow trees and house walls, another world of bats is stirring (Smith & Mathieson, 2005, 14).

Growing awareness of the extent and ecological significance of urban wildlife is a direct result of increased academic and public willingness to accept that the city and ‘nature’ may not be as mutually exclusive as once thought. It is possible, however, that this awareness is also partly due to an actual increase in the presence of wildlife in the city over the last few years. Certainly this is an idea with some popular currency, with two of Melbourne’s free weekly magazines recently running a cover story on ‘The Return of the Natives’ to the city (Murphy, 2005), although a good deal more research is required to test this claim.

Sub/urban Australians are not content merely with watching backyard nature. For instance, as the first *Wildwatch* survey confirmed, deliberate feeding of a broad variety of sub/urban wildlife species is widespread (Jones & Howard, 2001; NSW NPWS, 2002), adding weight to Low’s observation that the “boundary between pet and wild creature is sometimes blurring” (Low, 2002, 121). Another boundary becoming increasingly blurred is that between gardening discourse and ecological discourse. The ABC, for one, is well aware that while gardening remains the Australian recreation of first choice (Morgan-Poll, 2001) it is being renegotiated as ideas of nature take on new cultural work. Thus, 2003 saw the ABC publish *Habitat Gardening*, a book explaining how to creation of “a garden that favours Australian native plants over plants from other countries, and

Australian life forms and communities over those from any other place” (Grant, 2003, 2), reinforcing an eco-nationalist theme growing ever more explicit and normative in *Gardening Australia*, the ABC’s popular television and magazine series.

The interest in backyard natures revealed by the *WildWatch* surveys or gardening books is also evident in the public forms that ‘gardening’ has taken on over the last 15 years in Australian cities. Spurred on by policies aimed at devolving responsibility for environmental management, voluntary local land/coast/river care (or “Friends of ___”) groups have sprung up throughout sub/urban environments (e.g., Gooch, 2004; O’Byrne, 2006). Defined by a desire to defend endemic—perhaps, more accurately, precolonial—ecologies against armies of seemingly inexhaustible weedy invaders, in the process decrying inappropriate landscape aesthetics, these groups are busily ‘reclaiming’ a variety of urban open spaces, from waterways and coastlines to remnant bushland, railway lines and disused landfills. Such groups may well have been what Mike Archer and Bob Beale had in mind when they recently exhorted Australians to “go native” in the city, transforming “the urban gene pool ... [from] an alphabet soup of chaotically assembled ingredients” into cohesively managed ecosystems (Archer & Beale, 2004, 318-9). Urban landcare movements emulate earlier rural landcare movements, but differ from them in important ways—for instance, in their emphasis on public rather than private land and their often site-specific rather than catchment-based focus. Yet the place of urban landcare in environmental social movements in Australia remains almost entirely undocumented in both the (rural-oriented) landcare literature (e.g., Curtis & Van Nouhuys, 1999; Landcare, 2000; Lockie, 2004) and in analysis of Australian environmentalism (e.g., Doyle, 2000; Hutton & Connors, 1999; Pakulski & Tranter, 2004; Tranter, 2004).

II. MAKING SENSE OF AUSTRALIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM

Urban landcare is by no means the first expression of urban environmentalism in Australia, although it would seem to indicate a widening and diversifying social profile of support for urban environmental change. Australian environmental social movements have, until recently (Pakulski & Tranter, 2004; Tranter, 2004), been predominantly comprised of a sub/urban demographic that has had much to say about urban environments (eg., Burgmann & Burgmann, 1998; Hutton & Connors, 1999). Australian cities have been home to a range of ‘ecocity’ activists, advocates of everything from pedal-power to permaculture, since the 1970s (eg., Haughton, 1999; Urban Ecology Australia, n.d.).

It is generally true, however, that urban environmental concerns have taken on a different discursive form than those surrounding, so-called, ‘natural’ environments. This distinction is often conveyed through reference to ‘brown’ and ‘green’ forms of Australian environmental discourse (McAllister & Studlar, 1999; Pakulski *et al.*, 1998). Brown discourses have paid considerable attention to urban environments but have been predominantly pragmatic and managerial discourses aimed at ameliorating (or sometimes simply redistributing) environmental problems, especially risks to human health, in which the figure of nature is notable mostly for its absence. Often local in their scope and organised around substantially private interests—e.g., Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) movements—brown discourses have offered little in the way of cultural critique and have been developed within largely informal social networks. Green discourses, by contrast, have been closely associated with formal environmentalist organisations and broad scale environmental protest. Predominantly global in scope, such discourses establish a central role for the figure of nature and have largely defined the public face of environmentalism in Australia through high-profile campaigns such as those to ‘save’ wilderness areas, ban the mining of uranium and protect whales. More radical in political content, the broad cultural critique offered by green discourses has been organised around the values of wilderness, acknowledging urban environments primarily as examples of the loss of nature.

The distinction between brown and green discourse, however, needs to be understood in the light of processes by which Australian “environmentalism continues to widen in its social reach while differentiating and fragmenting internally (Pakulski & Tranter, 2004, 226). Environmental concerns have been brought closer to the social mainstream since the late-1980s, most notably through the Federal Government’s adaptation of the Brundtland Commission’s ‘second wave’ vision of sustained development; the first, ‘limits-to-‘growth’ wave of post-war environmentalism decomposing somewhere in the early 1990s (Davison, 2001, 13-21). ‘The environment’ has been institutionalised through its translation into educational curricula, scientific research, economic theory, political platforms, bureaucratic agencies and consumer habits. Sustainability has become a catchall found in everything from television news to national budget papers, while the majority of Australians now participate in recycling and a growing number are adopting energy and water conservation measures (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002, 2003).

At the same time, the proportion of the population claiming to be concerned about environmental problems has declined in the period 1992-2004 from 75% to 57% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004), with the membership of environmental groups remaining relatively static (Tranter, 2004). At 7.2%, the primary vote of The Greens for the lower house at the 2004 Federal Election was well below that of a genuine third political force, despite the fact that a majority of electors might now admit that they are “a bit of a ‘Greenie’ at heart” (Morgan-Poll, 2000). As the then conservative Federal Environment Minister, Senator Robert Hill observed with undisguised satisfaction in 1997, “the whole environment debate has changed... Everyone now is an environmentalist” (cited in Hutton & Connors, 1999, 264).

Although it remains meaningful to distinguish between brown and green discourses, then, it is possible to discern a third set of discourses—colour coded by Pakulski and Tranter (2004, 229-230), ‘white’—occupying social spaces between moderate, often self-interested, brown discourse and radical, cultural green discourse. Such emergent white discourses assume a greater political role for consumer preferences than earlier environmentalist discourses and have a more diffuse, and especially an older, demographic base. Concerned with issues such as the moral threat posed by gene technology, they offer a central role to the figure of nature, but emphasise the benefits of naturalness—as embodied, for instance, in the purchase of organic food or natural therapies or water views or native gardens or eco-tourism—rather than the virtue of wilderness. They thus lack the anti-urbanism characteristic of green discourse and are likely to be important in the renegotiation of urban nature and phenomena mentioned earlier, such as urban landcare and feeding of urban wildlife, mentioned above.

The colour coding of environmental concern has heuristic power, but needs to be employed in a way that reflects the messy reality it addresses. The point to make here is that the diffusion, routinisation and fragmentation of environmental concern within Australian society has not ensured easy acceptance of earlier environmentalist objectives that have, in any case, been heterogeneous from the beginning. Rather, these objectives and the discourses of nature through which they have gained expression have been opened to wider fields of contestation and renegotiation. The idea of wilderness, in particular, is likely to be increasingly contested within and between environmental movements as well as within the ecological and social sciences. At the same time, representations of wilderness will in all likelihood continue to be used to promote an ever-widening and internally contradictory array of social objectives. Awareness of ‘new natures’ will see environmentalist understandings of sub/urban sustainability built around efforts to recreate precolonial nature in cities or attempts to make Australian cities more urban (i.e., more dense) increasingly open to challenge. Anticipating these changes, the remainder of this paper looks at green discourses—discourses that have done so much to exclude the city from questions of nature—through the lens of the everyday sub/urban experience of members of green social movements.

III. NATURE-AT-HOME

Wildernesses are places of peace and quiet where we cry 'Enough!'
(The Wilderness Society, 1992, 14).

The Wilderness holds answers to more questions than we have yet learned to ask
(Newhall cited in Australian Greens, 2005).

The discussion that follows is informed by 29 semi-structured interviews with 13 urban members of *The Wilderness Society*—Australia's bastion of wilderness activism—and 16 urban members of the *Australian Greens*—Australia's expressly environmentalist political party. Participants responded to an invitation to active sub/urban members and staff of these organisations in Hobart and Perth—the capital cities of Tasmania and Western Australia, with populations of approximately 200,000 and 1,400,00, respectively—between June and September 2004. Largely conforming to demographic profiles of green, radicalised environmental concern (Pakulski & Tranter, 2004; Tranter, 1999, 2004), the sample displayed predominantly Anglo-Australian heritage, strongly represented women (64%), tertiary qualifications (93%), secular values (75%), and the 'baby-boomer' generation (57%, aged 40-60 years). Interviews were conducted with the intent of following connections between the environmental concerns, opinions and identities of participants and their everyday sub/urban environments and environmental life-history. The interviews incorporated a 'warm-up' questionnaire about 'environmental values' (questions, in the main, taken from the environment module of the International Social Survey Program) and demographic status followed by a semi-structured, recorded discussion of approximately 1 hour. They were conducted at the homes of participants (13 in Perth, 15 in Hobart), unless participants preferred otherwise, by the author—a present member of one of the groups and former member of the other who has lived in both cities—and transcribed in full. Pseudonyms are used to maintain anonymity.

The account offered here is exploratory and preliminary. Fuller analysis of interview narratives is on-going as part of a larger project involving around 90 interviews in Hobart, Perth and Melbourne with 45 members of *The Wilderness Society* and the *Australian Greens* and 45 members of a range of local urban environmental movements such as coastcare and community garden groups. The discussion that follows treats the interviews as a single group and is limited to providing some general observations about how members of 'green' groups encounter their everyday sub/urban environments. Later finer grained analysis will explore points of divergence as well as of convergence in the concerns of Wilderness Society and Australian Greens members, and between the residents of Hobart, Perth and Melbourne.

Reflecting the limits of any neat typology or stereotype of radical environmentalism, the interviews encompassed much diversity, with participants consistently contextualising and complicating their own use of the generalisations sanctioned by green discourse. In the pre-interview questionnaire, almost half of the participants disagreed with the proposition that 'city life is less environmentally sustainable than rural life', with a further third neither agreeing nor disagreeing with this claim, indicating that the sample does not bear out any simplistic account of green discourse as anti-urban. Only 4 respondents (15%) disagreed with the claim that 'high-density housing is more ecologically sustainable than low-density housing', although almost half of the sample neither agreed nor disagreed with this claim.

In the interviews, themselves, it emerged that the majority of participants considered suburban development, past and present, especially in the largest cities, to be the principal threat to ecological sustainability in Australian cities. 'Janina' (Perth) claimed that "within our sprawling, sprawling cities we are just destroying everything in our path," while 'Sandra' (Hobart) reflected that "maybe that's why I came to Tasmania, you don't get that urban sprawl, but when you go to the mainland and you see the spread, that's horrible." 'Mike' (Hobart) drew upon the social philosophy of Ivan

Illich to explain, at some length, why, “if we are going to come to terms with our impact on the Australian environment, somehow we have got to stop the massive sprawl of those 5 [biggest] cities.” Disaffection with suburbs saw environmental concerns joined to themes of the social sterility of suburbs that have been influential in Australian intellectual discourse since the late-19th century (Devlin-Glass, 1994; Gilbert, 1988). For example, asked whether she considered herself suburban, ‘Mandi’ (Hobart) replied:

Oh God, no! Well I lived in the suburbs for about 12 months, I lived in Doncaster [Melbourne], and I found it really oppressive, the time that I spent there, not because of the people, but because of that sort of Saturday morning ‘we get up and we wash the car and mow the lawns’ [t]here seems to be a lack of expression in the suburbs as compared from either really inner-city or really out of the city.

The theme of grass was a common one as participants linked the social and environmental shortcomings of suburbs. Reflecting on her sense of alienation from neighbours in a 1980s Northern suburb of Perth, one recent immigrant from Western Europe observed, “you can just see it, the sort of stuff that they buy for their kids. It’s very, very materialistic ... and spring lawn everywhere, y’know” (‘Nadia’).

Narratives about grass carry with them deeper meanings about belonging and environmentalist identity. Thus, ‘Kylie’, also from Perth reflected: “I think I retain enough of my Anglo background to probably deeply connect with rolling green, but ... I’ve kind of beaten that out of myself because I know of the environmental impact of maintaining lawns.” Here Kylie made explicit a tension between unreflective attitudes and formal knowledge that was implicit in the majority of interviews. An environmental professional in her 30s, Kylie concludes that Perth suburbs, “perched on the sand dunes,” were fundamentally out of place:

They look, they look so ephemeral, they look, they’re not part of that landscape at all. Y’know they just look like they’ve just been plonked on the sand dunes and they could so easily just be swept away. They’re not embedded at all.

However, unlike many other participants, ‘Kylie’ was aware of an irony between her environmental critique of suburbs and her own everyday, suburban life:

And when I was younger I was incredibly dismissive of suburbia and would have done anything to avoid living in such a soulless ... sort of place. [Interviewer: and now?] ... P’raps it is an age thing because I probably still do have that feeling about living in a brand new subdivision, y’know, out in the fringes of Perth. Maybe I’ve transferred my feelings about the death of suburbia or something to those fringes. And because the suburb where I live is probably more that middle-ring, y’know, it’s quite close to Fremantle. And it’s 1950s, 1960s. Maybe it just sort of feels just slightly more embedded again, y’know.

Like ‘Kylie’, three quarters of the interviewees lived in detached houses with private gardens. The majority of this group were also, like ‘Kylie’, to be found in middle suburbs on blocks ranging from, approximately, 1/8 to 1/3 of an acre. Only three participants lived in an apartment, with one of these subsequently moving into a detached house and another aspiring to own a house suitable for keeping a dog. Consistent with a predominance of tertiary educated professionals, over two thirds of interviewees owned or were purchasing their home. Yet, despite their suburban location and apparent commitment to private home ownership, there was an almost complete lack of positive sentiments about suburban development and suburban aspirations. Regardless of the apparent similarity of their own everyday life with much of what they criticised, few participants identified themselves with (their understanding of) generalisations and stereotypes about ‘sprawl’, the ‘Great Australian Dream’ and suburban lifestyles. Indicative of this, only 15% of participants elected suburban environments when asked in the questionnaire ‘if you could choose, where would you like to live?’ (a question taken from the 1994 Australian National Social Science Survey), with

33% electing rural/remote, 22% urban fringe and 19% inner-urban environments (however, there appeared to be considerable individual variation in how these categories were understood).

When speaking in specific terms about their home and local neighbourhood, rather than in terms of general categories, such as suburb, wilderness, ecology, environmental impact and sustainability, however, expressions of strong attachment to local sub/urban environments were common. In particular, those living in Hobart—a small city, by Australian standards, with much of it squeezed long and thin between a mountain and an estuary—almost unanimously conveyed the sense that their home environments provided “the best of both worlds” (‘Paul’ – Hobart); that is, they provided satisfying contact with ‘nature’ and convenient access to the opportunities they sought from the city. Most of the Hobart interviewees lived within 10km of the city centre in the middle-class suburbs to be found in the foothills of Mount Wellington.

While several participants remarked disapprovingly on ‘sprawl’, and particularly on the growing size of Australian dwellings, interviewees commonly expressed a desire for an everyday sense of space, an idea closely linked to positive experience of nature. For ‘Hendrika’, who immigrated to Australia in the 1970s after growing up in urban Holland, the theme of nature-as-space was directly linked to population density:

man has ruined it [Europe]. There are too many people. It drives you mad..... So, really, the people have ruined it for themselves, and that’s why there is such an appreciation of places like Tasmania and Australia in general by Europeans, because ...[of] the space, the influence of the space that does you good.

‘Helen’ (Hobart) clearly agreed: “Oh, I love it. Yes.... when I look out my window of a morning from my bed, I watch the sun. I see the sun come up. And the sense of space, looking out; that sense of space is fantastic.” For ‘Henry’ (Perth), as for several others, the theme of nature-as-space included a need for “independence and seclusion and space from other people.... I’m always doing gardening here, and it’s sort of like the space around me, y’know? I like the natural environment, the no pollution part of it.” ‘Kylie’s’ house, in her “quirky” Perth suburb, south of Fremantle, “overlook[s] a large oval with a bunch of trees. So, immediately we have a sense of space and, y’know, a manufactured landscape in front of us, but we’re not looking into another house.” Claire’ (Hobart) considered herself, “really fortunate to have a good view, so you’ve got that sense of space and feeling a part of the city as well.”

The linking of closeness to urban environments with retreat from people drew together the themes of nature-as-space and nature-as-peace. Barbara likes “space to think without noise, and I like to think that I can have some unobserved space in my residence,” while ‘Simon’s’ decision to buy a detached house with a good-sized garden near suburban bushland in Perth was influenced by the fact that he “can’t *stand* noise, particularly other people’s noise, well... *only* other people’s noise! [Laughs] I can understand noises that don’t emanate from people.” ‘Emma’ (Perth) drew the connection between noise, nature and the city this way:

I think that what we have got now ... is a City that doesn’t invite people to think about sitting and belonging ... and acting intelligently.... I think it [the city] does exactly the opposite of what going out in the bush does for me.... [In the city there is] a lot of noise, ... the whole concept that we have that there isn’t enough time, gets exaggerated there. And then when you do [try to slow down], y’know, when it’s your lunch break and you want to relax, there are very few places to go that aren’t just total noise.

Despite frequent sub/urban stories about the solace provided by gardening, views, companion animals, wildlife and by the spaces provided by urban bushland, beaches, mountains and rivers, questions about ‘nature’ commonly prompted from participants reference to ‘undisturbed’, wild, non-urban environments. Interviewees made no use of the idea of ‘urban nature’ and seemed uncomfortable with using the language of nature to talk about the city. Nonetheless, when pressed

to decide whether places such as suburban gardens and urban parks, and non-humans such as companion animals, were unnatural, most expressed the sense that 'nature' exists as a continuum or in varying degrees; that, in addition to wilderness 'there are all sorts of other types of nature' ('Jacqui' - Hobart). In part, this reflected the wider semantic complexity of the term 'nature' (Seddon, 1997), which in its broadest sense refers to existence itself and, thus, in the words of Sandra (Hobart), "the most unnatural also is nature". Similarly, 'Jo' (Hobart) explained that leafy green parks comprised of 'introduced' species are "not what nature is [in Australia]. Yet she did not consider such environments unnatural because "we, as part of nature, introduced it [Laughs]. But it's not a reflection of the natural environment in this part of the world." The result was, collectively, an account of sub/urban space as implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, unnatural, yet populated by many natural forms and processes. Recognising the inadequacy of conventional language in conveying this message, one participant went further than the others to suggest that the language of nature is useless:

I find it fascinating where the two [the natural and the unnatural] meet, cross over, or are totally juxtaposed together in strange ways. Y'know, you look at the harbour and I often stand on the bridge at night looking at the harbour and I used to think that dolphins [were rare] in the Swan River. And I, y'know, found out from doing that that they are always there, they are constantly there. ... They hunt around the pylons of the bridge, and there's ... pelicans, there's often cormorants and all sorts of things. And I find it [a] quite rich, y'know, nature experience. I, y'know, do avoid the word nature because I think it, it sort of, its so big as to be useless. Nature just is ('Julian' - Perth).

Conversely, while participants struggled to talk about 'nature' in the city, their accounts of wilderness gave as much, if not more significance to the absence of social phenomena that characterise everyday sub/urban life—such as "routine" ('Mandi' - Hobart), "a framework" ('Sandra' - Hobart) or "mould" ('Emma' - Perth)—as to the presence of 'nature', or expressly ecological phenomena. Coming home from wilderness to "that other reality" ('Barbara' - Hobart), then, was to return to find "your phone message bank's full ... you've just got to fit back into a timetable ... got to go shopping." For another respondent, wilderness is freedom and "freedom is no keys" ('Theresa' - Hobart).

CONCLUSIONS

the dominant ecological imaginary in Australia is suburban (Hogan, 2003, 54).

In a recent qualitative study of suburban gardeners in New South Wales, Lesley Head and Pat Muir observed the prevalence of 'the adversative but' in enabling people to hold together an abstract sense of obligation towards the environment with the often conflicting reality of their everyday choices and practices: that is, "the adversative *but* therefore acts as a linguistic or grammatical marker to produce a view of the world prioritizing the individual's needs over the nonhuman environment" (Head & Muir, 2005, 92). Curiously, however, this dynamic seemed often inverted in the interviews with environmentalists reported here. Their descriptions of their specific, embodied experience of local, everyday worlds tended to be qualified, often with overtones of guiltily conscience, by formal environmental knowledge, and the environmentalist identity to which this knowledge was tied. This knowledge commonly took the form of scientific claims about environmental impacts and 'quasi-scientific' ideals associated with 'nature', 'wilderness' and 'nativeness'.

The richness of interviewee encounters with urban nature evident in their *descriptive* accounts of their everyday life was obscured in their *explanatory* accounts of their environmental politics about wilderness and urban development. This disjuncture between description and explanation enables 'green' discourse to carry criticism of phenomena such as suburban sprawl without reflexively requiring those who employ it to question the longing for space, solitude, social autonomy and

familiar, intimate everyday encounters with a more-than-human world that was important in their own urban sense of connection to nature. Without questioning, that is, the 'suburban ecological imaginary' (Davison, 2005; Hogan, 2003) that inspires much environmental concern and that leads environmentalists to join a large portion of the Australian population in finding solace at the edges of the city or in the midst of their suburban gardens or curling up with their non-human housemates. This disjuncture is not well-explained, however, as a collective failure of individuals, such as is implied in the common accusation leveled against 'greens' of hypocrisy. While there are, no doubt, examples of this, the interviews exposed an incoherence between public discourse founded on scientific rationality and private discourse founded on embodied relationality that runs deep and wide through contemporary Australian society.

Recent wider intellectual and social interest in sub/urban nature, with the increased contestation about nature in the city this brings, represents a challenge to environmental movements to develop a more self-reflexive political advocacy of nature. Such reflexivity offers two principle benefits. First, it ensures that the centrality of a widely shared sub/urban experience to environmentalist concerns will be more visible, increasing the possibility that environmentalist movements can successfully pursue participatory democratic strategies when engaging the wider population in debates about lifestyle change. In particular, a heightened sense of commonality of interest with the wider community should enable a more flexible and subtle critique of suburbanization and avoid the reduction of complex ideas such as urban sustainability to simple formulae such as urban consolidation. Second, such reflexivity is necessary if environmental movements are to resist the collapse of concerns about nature into forms of self-interest, social inequality and naïve nationalism.

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