

# Rapporteur's Report

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## Introduction

The Environmental City stream explored and discussed a range of topics – many of which of course overlapped and also related to the other streams at this conference. The main headings were

- climate change
- critiques of the *idea* of sustainability and its translation into policies and procedures
- the problems of assessing and measuring both environmental change and the impacts of sustainability policies
- greenspace in cities
- urban farming, human health and obesogenic urban environments
- education and community involvement
- alternative sustainable housing and communities; sustainable ideas and policies in practice (or not) at local government level and in master-planned estates
- and finally a rather alarming paper on the threat termites pose to our cities and other infrastructure.

This paper tracks and summarises the session discussions, findings and recommendations and identifies a number of overarching themes, as follows:

### 1. Climate change: Vulnerable cities

There is now little or no doubt that climate change is happening and that its impacts on cities in particular could or will be catastrophic. Even if we could stop all **CO<sub>2</sub>** emissions tomorrow, it would take 200 years for the ocean to cool and **CO<sub>2</sub>** levels to fall. Cities are deeply implicated in climate change, major contributors to greenhouse gases, but also highly vulnerable to the impacts. Some of these impacts, expected to occur over the next decades, include

- temperature increase and heat islanding – which will make city centres unliveable
- biodiversity dieout - for example 25% of eucalypt species will not survive even the 1° increase in temperature expected by around 2030
- faster windspeeds and more frequent severe weather events
- the spread of certain damaging species – the Giant Northern Termites which at present only live as far south as Brisbane will be marching southwards to newly tropical Sydney and Melbourne. These insects ringback trees and can devour a timber house in a week.

Although I think we are resigned to the idea that cities ultimately cannot be totally sustainable, they can be seen as ‘moving towards’ sustainability– or rather survival-strategies. There are a great many practical and ingenious strategies to both mitigate these impacts on cities and reduce **CO<sub>2</sub>** emissions, and our discussions concluded that these had to go hand in hand. The questions therefore are no longer ‘Is climate change happening?’ or ‘What can we do about it?’, but *how* the body politic can be convinced to take it seriously, to develop the necessary policies and to begin putting them in place.

These conclusions overlapped with our explorations on education, particularly the idea of connecting governments and people with the outcomes of actions. Some discussants suggested that only an extreme event – a disaster, such as a cyclone wrecking a couple of densely populated coastal cities - would convince and galvanise us into action. Others countered: why wait for such a disaster to occur – *we* need to move this urgent message beyond the bounds of this conference.

Further, while such events are so often called ‘natural disasters’, as though beyond human control, this term is misleading. The causes and impacts of such disasters are inextricably linked with human activities, politics and economics.

## **2. Rethinking Sustainability – words and priorities for urban country**

The primary importance of climate change was also reflected in the discussions about the current language and thinking on sustainability. These days, it seems, everything must be sustainable – environment, economics and society as equal players. Nick Lowe and Phil MacManus argued in different ways that we may be losing sight of the main game here – that bike paths and community festivals are very nice and good to have, but counting them as sustainability measures in the face of the coming crisis trivialises the whole idea of sustainability. It’s not about quality of life, or ‘liveability’, but ensuring the very survival of cities *because* they ultimately depend on the environment. Nick similarly also critiqued triple bottom line accounting, which led to some lively discussion, with some discussants defending this now common practice as a useful reporting tool. However I think we agreed that we must be more careful and critical in our use of language, particularly language which insidiously makes its way from the world of business and growth into environmental discourse. Language shapes ideas and practice, language is a battleground, it can be a cloak for the very interests who are causing environmental problems, it can be deployed to postpone any real action.

However, discussion in the final session in this stream strongly suggests that the problem lies not in calling for sustainability in environment, economics and society, but *in the way this is seen* – as though these are separate arenas, and as though achieving sustainability in one is as good as achieving it in another. This is emerging as the comfortable, business-as-usual, greenwash approach. The way they *should* be seen is for what they are: interrelated aspects of the whole. To achieve environmental sustainability, it is necessary to look at economics and social impacts and factors, and vice versa. Daryl McKay showed fairly conclusively the sad failure of some great ESD policies in Newcastle because of economic funding problems and the hypocritical withdrawal of support from state and federal governments

## **3. Measuring environmental change and the impacts of sustainability policies**

The means and methods of assessing both environmental conditions and change, and sustainability measures and their impacts, were also critically reviewed. The basic maxim here is: if we can’t measure it we can’t fix it, so we need to know about both change (for better or worse over time), and whether policies are working.

This led to some very interesting discussion on, first, the collection of information – for State of the Environment [SoE] reporting for example – and, second, on how to make the information useful and relevant to the audience that needs it. For example, there are strong arguments to use the ecological footprint approach for cities, but it needs to be refined so it is meaningful in local areas. At the moment this approach assumes that landscape in cities is generic, when we know in reality it’s all different. And if one area is problematic and needs to be targeted, it makes no sense to spread the blame over whole city, to see the city as a single entity.

This related to the idea of producing *localised* profiles of, say energy and water use, so that councils can see how they are performing (or not) . The ironic thing is that most of the information for SoE comes from councils in the first place, and here Peter Maganov was highly critical of the wasteful, time consuming practice of local council personnel having to chase up data on water or air quality when this should be made available by other bodies. Council boundaries after all are artificial and

have little to do with these factors. There is also evidence of ‘fudging’ reporting, manipulating figures, adapting targets to make performance look better and so on.

Another suggestion was that there are too many indicators. In the attempt to be comprehensive, the priority areas get lost in the lists. There was some support for ‘headline’ indicators to simplify and target, say, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and water quality. Again the theme is one of communicating results to the people who need them – especially policy makers.

Finally a suggestion which gained strong support from delegates was for an independent auditor to enforce and oversee SoE and environmental reporting at all levels.

#### **4. Greenspace, urban ecologies and people**

Another important focus in the Environmental City stream was urban greenspace, with five papers taking a diverse range of interesting approaches. The importance of greenspace for countering heat islanding, for urban biodiversity, for urban well-being and for sheer aesthetic value was underscored in these papers and the discussions. And then there is the fact that greenspace provides ‘eco-services’ for cities – purifying water and air, for example. Some discussants were concerned that the fact that eco-services can be measured and given a ‘dollar value’, that it too must ‘work’ and ‘produce’ might privilege this kind of assessment over the many other values of urban greenspace.

However greenspaces are also complex human places, tied in with and interpreted through all kinds of ideas about nature and how we relate to it. For example, although cities are so often seen as the environmental villains, Aidan Davison’s paper suggested that in fact even the most committed green activists love and enjoy their suburban environments. We should be able to tap into latent and semiconscious enjoyment of urban life – to link up concern over wilderness and translate it into concern over cities and all the species that live there. With regard to biodiversity in greenspaces, our cities are in fact are not only human habitats, they are now refuges and habitats for many wild animals and rare plants – they are their homes too. But how do people relate to this? Here there was some contradictory evidence too– few people in Guy Barnett’s survey of Melbourne people knew anything about biodiversity – they like it, but mostly failed to name/identify species. But should scientific knowledge and names be the yardstick? Aidan Davison reported that 27,000 people around Australia logged onto an ABC website to report the wildlife in their own backyards. We *know* our cities are also homes to plants and animals of all sorts.

Greenspace is also inseparable from immensely complex planning procedures and issues about public/private ownership and access. So there are inevitably also tensions in its usage and management – it’s not enough to simply have the green bit on the map. As one discussant commented – it’s not just gross provision, but how to facilitate access and movement equitably. And the divergent requirements of people and other creatures are going to clash sometimes – people may want barbecues and boat ramps and somewhere to kick a ball, while National Parks wants to prioritise ecology and recreate pristine, human free environments – as though these ever existed. There are also class and ethnic differences in the way people use and see greenspace, and these are in turn related to issues of social and environmental justice.

Understanding the past is essential in the project of understanding the meaning and values of greenspace (and cities as a whole). It is important to see that what is there now was not necessarily always there and to see how and why people used, fought for and defended their commons/ greenspace/recreational areas in the past – history unravels and reveals the deep links between people and country. It also demonstrates that grassroots support and a sense of responsibility we

talk so much about fostering today in fact already existed in the suburbs, and has been discouraged and belittled by modern ecocentric and ahistoric policies.

And, while on the subject of urban commensal creatures : termites are a largely unremarked urban threat. They were there on our suburban blocks long before we moved in and they have the potential to do \$4billion of damage per annum because the protective/poisonous organochlorines treatments are reaching the end of their lifespan. Research is underway on better ways to deal with the termite threat – but interestingly it gets very little funding compared to pest threats to rural agribusiness.

## **5. Urban farmlands /foodways**

The discussants agreed upon immense importance of better urban foodways, the maintenance of urban farming and the links with urban health. These overlapped with the sessions on greenspace – in terms of health and amenity and the fact that greenspace and farmlands will mitigate heat islanding caused by climate change. Urban farming reduces the need for energy and production of waste, supports farmers, provides fresher, healthier food and counters what Rob Dyball calls ‘obesogenic environments’. On the other hand, environmental issues which can be problematic include irrigation and chemical inputs.

Despite years of lobbying by activists and some scientists, the food councils and other organizations, the fact that urban areas produce a significant amount of Australia’s fresh food (around 25% of total production), and the basic fact that cities need food security, one discussant pointed out that urban agriculture is often not taken seriously. Perhaps the idea of ‘urban farming’ is seen as an oxymoron, in the same way that ‘nature’ and ‘city’ are so often (incorrectly) assumed to be opposites. Further, the tide of urban expansion over productive farm land shows little sign of letting up. Planners still see the edges of the city as ‘blank spaces’, as though there is nothing there. However, speakers and delegates generally agreed there was room for optimism with the ‘mental models’ provide by the food councils, the spread and growing popularity of farmers’ markets, and hopes of a generational change in attitudes and habits with regard to food, shopping and diet. The question of whether and how urban farming itself will be passed on to the next generation was raised as an area which needs urgent research.

## **6. Suburbs**

Suburbs were a constant presence in our discussions, but apart from one paper on master-planned suburbs, it was a more oblique theme. That image most emblematic of the city’s ills and obesogenic environments, the McMansion, or Start-up Castle, was used several times, but more as a symbol of urban greed and waste than as a real place where real people live. We have to be careful of class and regional stereotypes here. Remember, it’s always the homes the middle and lower class aspirants of the western suburbs which are held up in this way, and never the gargantuan mansions of the great and good of Potts Point or Vaucluse. Their greedy houses and lovely gardens are ‘beautiful’ and ‘elegant’ and once they get to be 50 years old they become heritage and are protected.

It seems however from Morag Gamble’s paper, and also to an extent in Ned Wales’, that suburbs can be well-functioning, interesting self-sustaining and sustainable communities without packing everyone into Manhattan style high-rise apartments, as recommended by some commentators, such as *Herald* writer Elizabeth Farrelly. However, the perennial problem of distance to work and schools remains, so information networking, home offices, transport and decentralisation remain as equally important parallel concerns. Another problem lies in the sheer inertia of local government planning legislation - it seems it is still much easier, quicker and cheaper to do a business-as-usual

development than to do something different and more sustainable. However, some councils have introduced measures encouraging sustainable development – Brisbane City Council, for example, has established a merit certificate system to this end.

## **7. Education/Communication**

The theme that tied a lot of these discussions together was education – encompassing conveying information to target audiences, reshaping community behaviour and reconnecting individuals with the outcomes of their actions. Cities, it seems, make us too comfortable, they insulate us from environmental outcomes. The importance of the ‘seeing, feeling, touching’ ways of conveying knowledge or scenarios (for example, in Tony Fry’s paper) was remarked upon several times. One problem pointed out was that the scientific story of climate change has not been taken up in the cultural sector, and so it is not taken seriously by the community or politicians. It is still seen as an obstruction, something that is not or should not be ‘in my backyard’. One would hope ‘education’ would not have to consist of an extreme weather event or other disaster.

The irony, as Lyn McLoughlin pointed out, is that urban people are causing more problems (for various reasons – the list is long) but at the same time demanding better-quality, cleaner environments. I’ve found this in my research on Penrith – people hate suburban sprawl, but their favoured form of housing is the detached house on the suburban block. Perhaps this contradiction can be directly addressed and these desires and concerns harnessed. Lyn’s paper demonstrated the extraordinary success of the Department of Environment and Conservations education program for cleaner water and littering. Surely if it worked there, it would work elsewhere.

In short, as many speakers pointed out, we need to reconnect public and private discourses through our many institutions and media. And such programs should include those who *create* the urban environment - from professionals to bulldozer drivers – as well as the general public. Again, context, culture and history are important here – diversity is a key. Urban behaviour is not just about consumption driven by greed and self-interest. We *must* recognise that these actions are deeply culturally bound and historically constructed. They are drivers – therefore we should study them. Hence conferences like this should foster more communication across disciplines, including those which deal with cultural patterns, for example, history, anthropology and sociology.

To close on a slightly optimistic note, then, remember the aftermath of the Canberra fires? People in one area were asked not to put grey water down their sinks, so as to avoid a sewerage plant failure. As one, they did it. The grey water level plummeted to almost zero and the disaster was avoided. It seems that urban people can and will help if they see a common, urgent goal which they believe they can do something about.